Of Black & Gold: The Redeeming Star
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Of Black & Gold: The Redeeming Star

by AzuliaStar

Summary

"Redemption is not given — it is earned, piece by piece, in silence, in shadow, and most of all, in sacrifice."

The war is finally there and the Plan is in motion. To redeem his soul, Regulus must outwit the darkness he once served, protect the man he he was never supposed to love, and finally choose who he is, not who he was told to be.

But redemption always comes at a cost — and what price will he ultimately pay to reclaim his name in the sky?

Notes

Hi there, all of you!

Welcome to the fourth and final book of the Black & Gold Series. It's going to be a buuumpy ride, so buckle up!

First of all: thank you so, so much to everyone who's been along for the journey — whether you've been here since The Gathering Storm or just jumped in somewhere along the way. Your support, comments, praise, theories and reflections mean the world to me.

Now, a quick scheduling update:
I will be posting every Monday (next chapter on the 14th). I originally aimed for twice a week (Mondays and Thursdays), but... life is HECTIC. If things calm down, I might switch to that, but for now, once a week is what I can commit to. Could I have waited with publishing until I had more chapters finished? Yesss, but unfortunately I have the self-restraint of a child lol.

Thennn most importantly, the warnings.

We are at war, and things are getting dark and heavy. You are all familiar with a bit of that in this series already, but this part will undoubtedly be heavier. I want to expand on that a bit, but I have hidden the warnings for people that do NOT want to see them. So, if you want to be entirely surprised by the story and go in blind, you'd better just take the fact that this story is going to be

heavier and NOT expand the warning notes hereafter. But if you're someone who prefers a heads-up (especially if you're working through anything yourself), I highly recommend expanding the content warnings below to make sure you're comfortable moving forward.

Warnings

This story includes many of the same themes you've seen throughout the series, including domestic abuse, sexual abuse, torture, war-related violence, psychological trauma, arranged marriages, internalised homophobia, graphic depictions of sexual actions, and so forth and so on. These are central to the narrative and are not just passing references. They are dealt with explicitly and thoroughly!

I've chosen to opt out of using official Archive Warnings — partly because I'm still relatively new to AO3 and don't always trust myself to tag everything perfectly, and partly because this story leans heavily on mystery and slow reveals, which I don't want to spoil upfront. With these expandable warnings, I try to balance these things in the story and your protection as a reader.

With that in mind, I reckon you've already seen the Minor Character Death tag. We are at war and people WILL die. With minor I mean anyone except for the great three (i.e. Reg, James or Isa), but people are dying and you will most probably NOT like it. If character death, grief or traumatic loss are things you're sensitive to right now, this might not be the best time to read — or at least, I suggest checking in with yourself as you go.

That all being said, I just wanted to share that I am sooo excited for this part and that I can't wait to finish this story with you. But well, before that... a lot has to happen first ;)

As always, LOTS of love, and let me know what you think!

xx

Chapter 1: Prologue

“Are you quite sure you don’t want to stay for lunch?” Cissy asked for what must have been the trillionth time.

“No, thank you, I can’t,” Regulus lied, also for the trillionth time.

It was a beautiful summer’s day — about as beautiful as they came on the English east coast, which meant a few days of sun, followed by unbearable humidity, and then a deluge of rain, as though nature were punishing them for overindulging in vitamin D.

Cissy sighed. “It’s just — I don’t like you being alone at Black Manor. With all your friends on holiday…”

Regulus offered her a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry, Cissy. I’m just… relishing the solitude, for as long as I can.”

This was, in fact, another lie. Regulus hadn’t spent a single day alone since the holidays began two weeks ago, but the company he’d been keeping was questionable at best, so for everyone’s sake, it was better to lie.

Because Regulus had once again — as he always did, when things in his own world became too much — sought refuge among Muggles. Or rather, one Muggle in particular: Marie-Anne. She worked most days at the familiar bookshop in London, and Regulus gladly tagged along. There was another Muggle, by extension, who Regulus spent time with, as Marie-Anne often passed her afternoons off with her friend Fred — and somehow always managed to talk Regulus into coming too. Fred worked at a somewhat dodgy little garage next to a petrol station, and, well, Regulus did rather like cars. Being coaxed into having coffee and watching Fred dismantle and repair engines, while Marie-Anne talked about the woes of university life and her friends, turned out to be a rather pleasant experience.

Cissy pulled him out of his thoughts, throwing him a knowing smile and gently pinching his shoulder. Now that Regulus was to be engaged to Isa in a few weeks, and with the start of their final year at Hogwarts fast approaching, there wouldn’t be much solitude in his life going forward. He was fairly certain they would be expected to marry and live together right after graduation.

“Besides,” Regulus added, stacking one more lie atop the growing pile,

“I still have to sort out the details for the trip to Morocco.”

Cissy smiled. “You know, your brother always teased you for being such a romantic, but I’m sure Isa is grateful for it.” She sighed. “Though I thought you’d go for somewhere like Greece… or even Polynesia.”

Regulus shrugged. “Well, I thought it would be nice for Isa. You know how at home she feels in the region.”

This was, for once, not a *complete* lie.

Regulus was positive Isa *would* love the destination. Isa liked the desert, enjoyed experiencing other cultures, different food. But Isa had spent years in the Levant rather than North Africa, and well, that was hardly the same. Regulus knew better than to reduce the region to some monolithic whole, as the Maghreb was undoubtedly different from the Levant.

Still, Cissy didn’t need to know that. Nor did she need to know about the real — and far more urgent — reason Regulus had chosen that particular destination for their engagement trip.

Unbidden, Mr Nott’s voice echoed sharply in his mind.

“The Bedouins are known for it. Some sects, anyway. Old texts — desert-born, you might say — that explore soul-binding, disintegration, all of it, in far more explicit detail than anything you’ll find here.”

Yes, Regulus had great plans. He’d need to make the most of the time he had left before he was once again confined within the walls of Hogwarts. Before he was watched — whether by Dumbledore or by his fellow Revolutionaries.

He felt the letter burning a hole in his pocket and rose from the seat in the morning room. It was already getting late. He’d promised Marie-Anne he’d pop by during her lunch break, and then he needed to get to Diagon Alley to send an anonymous owl.

Great plans indeed.

*****

As promised, Regulus dutifully joined Marie-Anne on her lunch break. As always, she filled the silence with breezy, rambling conversation, minimising the risk that Regulus might say something odd or wildly

out of place in the Muggle world. She spent most of it chatting animatedly about her upcoming holiday in Portugal. Afterwards, he stayed to help her rearrange a few stacks of books and unpack a delivery of new titles. It wasn't until he glanced at the clock behind the till that he realised how late it had gotten — and he really did need to post that letter.

"I should go," he said, brushing off his trousers. "Running late again."

"Alright, don't be a stranger, Reg," Marie-Anne said with a smile, tucking a loose curl behind her ear. "I'm off tomorrow, but I'll be at Fred's in the afternoon. Fancy coming along?"

"Sure," he said, already moving towards the door. "See you then."

He shut the door behind him, the little bell chiming above his head.

Outside, he relished the summer heat for a moment. Another additional benefit of taking refuge in the Muggle world was the excuse to wear a shirt rather than suffer through the thoo-thick robes in the summer heat. The weather absolutely called for a T-shirt, but the sight of the Mark made him uneasy. He couldn't charm it invisible either — Marie-Anne had seen it before, and she'd most definitely ask questions if the 'tattoo' had suddenly vanished. Still, a long sleeve was better than a set of robes, so he considered it a win nonetheless.

He debated whether to Apparate straight to the Diagon Alley point or to walk for a bit first. It was rather a long way to cover on foot, but as the weather was lovely, he decided to enjoy it a while longer, Apparating in once he was halfway there. He liked the anonymity of Muggle London, liked how his presence just drowned in the crowds of locals and tourists.

Oh, how he'd be forced to eat these words.

Because in hindsight, it would've been *so* much better to have just Apparated into Diagon Alley — and as it turned out, Muggle London wasn't quite as anonymous as he'd believed.

He'd left the bustle of the city centre behind and was weaving his way through a quieter, residential bit of West London, absentmindedly whistling the tune Marie-Anne had been humming earlier. He stopped at a zebra crossing, waiting to cross.

That was when he saw it — and stopped dead in his tracks.

He blinked, once, then again, checking if his eyes were playing tricks on him.

A car honked behind him. The sound was irritating and loud, yet Regulus barely registered it.

Because there, on the other side of the street, was a car.

Which, in and of itself, wasn't particularly remarkable — he was in bloody West London, after all. What *was* remarkable, though, were the people in and around it.

For a fraction of a second, it was like being catapulted back into the Great Hall at Hogwarts.

Evans. Macdonald. Pettigrew. Lupin…

Sirius.

James.

No. No. *No.*

His heart kicked up in his chest, pounding against his ribs like it was trying to break free. His eyes went wide as Quaffles.

He could have passed by unnoticed. He could have ducked his head and kept walking, melted into the crowd like he usually did, but the honking car had — in a cruel, *cruel* twist of fate — drawn all the attention to him, which meant that now he was standing, frozen, in full view of six ex-Gryffindors — including his brother and said brother's best mate, who just so happened to also be Regulus's ex-secret lover.

A fact that Sirius had discovered barely two weeks ago.

Regulus hadn't seen them since the Dementor attack. Surely the revelation had shot the little gang — the *Marauders*, as they liked to call themselves — in a state of utter crisis. Some part of that crisis must've passed, apparently, for them to all be sitting civilly around that ridiculous car.

But what to do now?

He could just… nod and walk on.

He could just… do absolutely nothing and walk on.

Or — perhaps — throw himself into traffic. Yes, that was looking increasingly appealing. If he backed into the road now, maybe a lorry would—

Suddenly, a car door opened.

James stepped out and joined the group already standing around the vehicle —Evans, Macdonald and Pettigrew. Lupin and Sirius remained seated in the car.

James ran a hand through his hair, visibly uneasy. “H—hi.”

Regulus felt there was no single drop of blood left in his face. He hadn’t seen James since the Dementor attack, neither for dinner that night or breakfast the next morning, and now, so unexpectedly, he was *here*…

“H—hello,” he managed to stammer.

Oh. This *hurt*.

He was distracted from his utter discomfort when Sirius got out of the car and slammed the door behind him with a dramatic sort of violence that would’ve made Mother proud. A few nearby pedestrians jumped.

Lupin followed a second later from the backseat, his eyes darting nervously between Sirius, James and Regulus like he’d stumbled into a duel and was trying to calculate which direction was safest to duck.

“What are *you* doing here?” Sirius asked, arms folded, tone as frosty as the Hogwarts grounds under Dementor attack two weeks ago.

Regulus blinked. “…Walking.”

“Yes, I see that,” Sirius replied coolly.

Regulus raised a brow. “And what are you doing here?”

“Driving.”

“Yes, I see *that*.”

There was a very awkward pause.

“Well,” Lupin interjected, clearly trying to lighten the mood, “technically we’re not really *driving*, as we can’t get the thing to actually, er… go.”

Regulus looked past Sirius at the vehicle. It was a rather unremarkable car — an ageing, slightly dented brown Vauxhall Cavalier. A half-peeled bumper sticker clung to the back, and the whole thing looked rather shabby.

Sirius huffed. “Well yes, I can’t help the bloody enchantments aren’t working, can I?”

Regulus blinked again. “It’s enchanted?”

Lupin nodded.

“It doesn’t work?” Regulus asked slowly.

Sirius threw him a sharp look. “Obviously. That’s what he just said, isn’t it?”

Regulus rolled his eyes at Sirius’s tone. “I mean… the *normal* way. You can’t drive it?”

James scratched the back of his neck awkwardly. “Yeah, no. None of us can drive. Obviously.”

Regulus looked from one person to the next — Evans, Macdonald, Lupin, James, Sirius — and then let out a loud laugh. Here he was, in the company of Muggleborn Evans, Halfblood Macdonald and Lupin, Muggle-lover James and motorbike-adoring Sirius, and somehow *he* — the Heir of the most noble House of Black — was the only one who knew how to drive a bloody car.

Regulus’s laughter clearly rubbed Sirius the wrong way, as his eyes were now blazing. James shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other, while Lupin looked both faintly amused and slightly worried.

“We can’t keep the car here,” Evans said, either oblivious to the atmosphere or pointedly ignoring it. “We’ll get fined. It’s not registered properly and we’ll end up in trouble.”

“We’ll just have to get it back to the flat,” Pettigrew suggested helpfully. “Then we can try and fix the enchantments. If we could, y’know, find someone who could actually *drive* the thing…”

Evans looked directly at Regulus.

Regulus looked back at Evans.

She knew he could drive. She had, in fact, almost exactly a year ago,

sat in a car driven by him. But the thought of steering *this* car under the watchful eyes of his brother, James and their gaggle of Gryffindors filled him with such pure, undiluted horror that he had no idea what to do with himself.

So, in a moment of utter despair, he turned to Evans and blurted out, "Please *do* take the advice of your sister and get a bloody license."

This was, quite frankly, not helping the discomfort in the situation, as it clearly only highlighted the unfortunate detail that Regulus had somehow been privy to private sisterly advice exchanged between Evans and her sister.

Regulus groaned.

Evans narrowed her eyes, slightly pink about the ears. "Well, Black," she said with a gleeful smirk, "why don't *you* show us?"

Sirius snorted, disparagingly. "Sure – like *he* knows how to drive a car."

Regulus was too stressed and uncomfortable to contain himself and — very unfortunately indeed — took the bait. "I *can* drive a bloody car."

Sirius's jaw nearly dropped onto the floor, and a part of Regulus relished it.

Rationally, he knew it would be better to just leave the group to it. He could not risk being seen with what was most likely Dumbledore's freshest gang of soldiers — especially not now. Yet, there was a magnetic pull to James — the boy Regulus was sure he wouldn't get the chance to, possibly ever, see again. And here he was…

Also — as unfortunate as it may be — there was a very distinguished petty part of him that truly, *truly* wanted to see Sirius's expression when he drove off. It was the same petty part that made Regulus roll his eyes and stalk towards the car. With a long-suffering sigh, he opened the driver's side door and got in.

There was a brief flurry of movement behind him.

"Well," said Macdonald, taking a step back, "I guess I'll Apparate."

"Yeah, me too," Pettigrew echoed, not hesitating in the slightest. Evans nodded along.

James, however, quickly darted forward. “I’ll come with,” he said, sliding into the passenger seat without waiting for an answer.

Sirius’s expression soured immediately. He glanced sharply between Regulus and James, then — as if to outdo him in sheer pettiness — said with pointed finality, “Me too,” and climbed into the backseat.

Lupin, looking like he couldn’t quite decide whether to be afraid, entertained or just deeply uncomfortable — and thus ended up a strange combination of all three — jumped in beside Sirius.

A very, *very* uncomfortable and tense silence settled over the car. It made Regulus acutely aware of his own breathing as he turned the key in the ignition. The engine gave a low, hesitant growl — and Regulus felt, unexpectedly, a flicker of gratitude for Fred taking him on several drives over the past fortnight. At least he felt a shiver of confidence. It might have been paper thin, but it was there.

He, as expected, did get to see that completely baffled expression from Sirius when he drove off, but it didn’t take long for that look to morph into something bordering on homicidal instead.

“Please tell me one of you at least knows where we’re going,” Regulus sighed.

“I do,” Lupin said gently from the back, catching Regulus’s eye in the rearview mirror. Regulus nodded once, keeping his gaze fixed exactly *not* on Sirius — whose sheer irritation was actually radiating through the vehicle — and *not* on James — who looked so incredibly handsome it made Regulus’s brain stop functioning. Which was, seeing the circumstances, not a very convenient feat.

“Right,” Regulus muttered, shifting into gear.

He glanced down at the dashboard — then swore, loudly.

“Oh for the love of — the thing’s *empty*?”

“What?” James asked nervously. He had been fiddling restlessly with his trouser leg first, then the air vent, the window crank, and now the knobs on the radio like a toddler high on sugar.

Regulus sighed. “The car doesn’t have any fuel.”

“Oh,” James said, blinking as if that were an entirely foreign concept. “It works on fuel? But how do Muggles fill it?”

Regulus turned to him slowly. “And *you’re* going to live in Muggle London?”

James threw him a sheepish smile, one so disarming that Regulus had to violently suppress the flutter in his stomach and quickly look away.

“Alright. What now?” Lupin asked.

Regulus exhaled sharply through his nose. “I’ll fix it.”

In some twist of cosmic irony, they weren’t far from Fred’s garage and the attached petrol station. Regulus prayed to every available divine force that the tank would hold long enough to get them there because the idea of being stranded in a car with Sirius, James and Lupin made his stomach churn.

They rolled through the city, traffic chugging sluggishly along. The streets were crowded — black cabs and red buses cut into lanes, pedestrians hurried past or loitered smoking on the pavement.

Inside the car, though, the silence was deafening.

Regulus focused on the road, doing everything in his power to ignore the persistent twitching beside him. James was bouncing his knees, ruffling his hair, and had just discovered the hazard light switch — which he pressed three times in a row. Regulus was too busy swatting his hands away each time to properly register just how nervous James must be in the current company.

The driving wasn’t completely smooth — the car jerked forward several times pulling away from traffic lights, and Regulus wasn’t exactly driving quickly — but it wasn’t disastrous enough for the non-drivers in the car to visibly notice.

So, they just moved in tense, unbearable silence.

After several blocks, James finally broke it. “I might get a license,” he said, his voice contemplative.

Regulus snorted. His anxiety, the need to focus on the road, and the distractions James kept producing had all lowered his guard — so much so that he couldn’t stop himself.

“You are the last person who should be allowed to drive a car, James.”

James turned pink at the ears. Regulus glanced away quickly,

suddenly fully registering how teasing and oddly intimate the remark was — and, more importantly, the fact that Sirius was there to witness it.

Lupin clearly picked up on the discomfort and turned to Sirius. “That goes for you too.”

Sirius scoffed. “I’ll have you know I’m not interested in cars. Only motorcycles.”

“They’re easier,” Regulus said flatly, trying to fill the space. “Not as big. Can easily sneak through.”

There was a pause.

“Ah,” Sirius said coldly. “You should be good at that, then.”

The air turned instantly brittle, another tense silence hanging in the car.

No one quite knew what to say — or how to behave — in this utterly bizarre situation of Regulus navigating a car through Muggle London, with his ex-lover James beside him, and his brother — clearly fuming over being lied to about this for three years — behind him, seated next to Lupin, who had known about James and Regulus and *also* apparently loved Sirius. Which, very likely, only Regulus knew.

When had things become so bloody confusing?

Regulus pulled into the petrol station and shut off the engine. Thankfully, Lupin had some Muggle money on him, enough to pay for the petrol.

Alright. All he had to do was fill up the tank, drive this stupid car to their flat wherever it was, and then be done with it. The only consolation of this utter, utter awkward moment was that it was so bad that it couldn’t possibly get any worse.

Until it — of course — turned out it could.

“Reg!?”

Oh no.

Oh *no*.

He crouched instinctively. It didn’t help in the slightest, didn’t make

him less visible to the tall, broad-shouldered, unavoidably enthusiastic figure striding over.

“Reg! You got a *car* now?” Fred’s voice boomed cheerfully. He clapped Regulus hard on the back. “How do you have a car and I don’t know about it?”

“It’s not mine. It’s — it’s my brother’s,” Regulus managed to produce, his voice immensely strained.

Fred grinned and turned, naturally, to the car, where James and Sirius were looking at the scene in complete and utter shock. Lupin, for his part, was clearly trying not to laugh, at which he failed miserably.

“Aaaah! You must be the brother!” Fred said cheerfully, not reading the room in the slightest. “I’m Fred.” He offered a hand through the open window. “Good to meet you.”

Sirius, expression blank with confusion, shook it slowly.

James just stared. His mouth opened slightly, then closed again.

Regulus quickly filled the tank and paid inside, nodding politely at the women at the counter. Then he all but ran back to the car, gave Fred the world’s most strained smile and turned the engine on.

“Well, I’ll — see you later.”

Fred grinned. “You better! And bring the car again, yeah?”

Regulus nodded stiffly as he drove away.

He could feel his brother’s eyes burning holes in his back, and had to muster all the self-restraint in his body not to meet James’s confused, questioning gaze. Silence had returned to the car — though this time, it was loud with many unspoken questions. He could practically hear them thinking, hear their minds spinning over the fact that he knew a Muggle. That he — Regulus — knew how to operate a car, how to put fuel in it. That there was a Muggle garage attendant out there greeting him like he was a bloody local.

Regulus winced.

James had started fidgeting again — twitchy fingers on the air vent, tapping his knee, elbow knocking lightly against the door. Regulus glanced over, half-ready to tell him to sit still — but stopped.

There was a flush creeping up James's neck, and something oddly skittish in the way he moved, like he was trying not to look but failing. His eyes kept flicking — again and again — to Regulus's mouth.

Oh.

Regulus cleared his throat quietly, voice pitched low, meant only for the passenger seat. "So this is your thing, then?"

James blinked. "What?"

Despite the discomfort and all the tension still twisting in his gut, Regulus couldn't help the smirk that tugged at his lips. There had always been something equally endearing and entertaining about a disarmed James.

"Vehicles."

James coughed, then flushed a deeper red. "No. Not… not vehicles. Just… You. In vehicles."

Regulus nearly swerved into a postbox.

Apparently — and unfortunately — their exchange hadn't been as private as they wanted, as Sirius made a very high-pitched, indignant noise. "Are you *kidding* me?"

Lupin burst into laughter, full and open, head thrown back against the seat.

Regulus resisted the overwhelming urge to chuck something at both of them and gripped the wheel tighter, falling back into silence. Less than ten minutes later, they pulled up outside the flat.

And here — here is where the discomfort peaked.

He could feel it rising in his chest, thick and sharp, pressing behind his eyes. He knew what this was. He'd been given a moment — a rare, fleeting chance. It was now or never. Somehow — by some twisted stroke of luck — this whole ordeal might actually be a blessing in disguise. He'd assumed he wouldn't see James again — not in the foreseeable future, certainly not before getting engaged to Isa. And now he was here. Right beside him, so close… Close enough to touch. If he didn't say something now, he might never get the chance again.

But there was one obvious problem — Sirius.

Regulus knew his brother well enough to recognise the tension bristling off him, well enough to know that Sirius was dying to speak to him alone. Between the sudden retreat of their gang following the attack and the departure from Hogwarts, Sirius hadn't been able to seek Regulus out yet. The cold, passive-aggressive demeanour was nothing but a build-up, the pressure before the inevitable bang.

And Regulus got it. He wanted to talk to Sirius, too. Sirius had known him better than anyone for years, and this, the knowledge of Regulus loving *men*, well, that was *massive* — something life-changing, world-altering. And it was not just any man, either, but Sirius's not-brother-by-blood, but certainly by choice… Besides, this was so much bigger than just Sirius's connection to James, and Sirius would understand that. Yes, in fact, he was the only one who would really, truly understand the gravity of the situation. The only one who would truly understand what loving James Potter in the Black household entailed.

But this — the engagement, James… It was more pressing.

He didn't even understand himself. All he knew was that his Patronus had changed. It was now the same as James's — a stag. Surely other people had stags, right? So how Sirius had put the pieces together was still a mystery. Sure, Sirius had seen him walking down the stairs the morning after his last night with James, there were the letters… But was that really enough?

And what did it mean? What did it mean that his Patronus had become James's? Was it true, what people said — about Patronuses being linked to souls? That they changed when your soul… bonded with someone else's? Wasn't that just a romantic myth? A silly little story for dreamy schoolgirls? There was so much to unpack, so much he didn't understand...

And then there was an even more pressing issue. What had James told Sirius? Had he been discrete about it, or had he told him every detail, answered every question Sirius had posed? Had he told him about all the things they had said and done in the depth of the night?

Regulus shuddered at the idea, then turned swiftly to the boy next to him.

"Could I... speak to you? Just for a minute… alone?"

James looked at him, then flicked a glance to Sirius — clearly clocking

that Regulus was cutting off a conversation the two brothers desperately needed to have. But he didn't argue, and instead simply nodded once.

Sirius, however, did not take the request lightly.

He looked stunned for a moment — as if Regulus had slapped him — and then something like betrayal flashed across his face. Without a word, he shoved the car door open and slammed it shut behind him.

Lupin hesitated, watching the two of them, then gave Regulus a tight nod before following, shutting the back door gently.

Silence fell, heavy and muted.

Regulus stayed facing forward, heart hammering, palms sweating on his thighs. *Oh* , he had to tell him, had to tell him about Isa…

The sudden feeling of James's hand in his snapped him out of his nerves. The feeling was comforting and familiar. Regulus was sure that no matter what happened, no matter whether he'd see James ever again, he would never forget the feeling of James's hands in his — warm, strong and surprisingly soft. Familiar in a way that made his stomach lurch with longing.

Regulus closed his eyes for half a moment, willing himself to experience the feeling wholly, completely.

He didn't dare look outside. He knew Sirius and Lupin were lurking nearby — he could feel the burn of their gaze through the windscreen.

"How have you been?" James asked quietly.

Regulus swallowed. His throat was drier than the world's most expensive parchment. He nodded once. "Good," he lied. "You?"

James gave a one-shouldered shrug. "Yeah. Good."

Regulus nodded again. "My brother hasn't lynched you."

James let out a slightly mirthless snort. "No, not yet, at least."

"How did he take it?"

James opened his mouth, then closed it again. Eventually, after a deep sigh, he opened it again. "I… I don't think he had unpacked it yet. I think he still has to… process it. He might still kill me."

“Surely you told him it was *me* who wanted it to stay secret?”

James scratched his head awkwardly, which was enough of an answer.

Regulus groaned. “Oh, c’mon — James, if you just told—”

“It doesn’t make much of a difference, Reg,” James cut in. “I knew the terms. I agreed. Doesn’t make much difference whose idea it was.”

Regulus groaned. James and his bloody sense of justice.

He decided to drop it and instead looked out the window — not straight ahead at his brother and Lupin, but sideways, towards a row of tired-looking shops with flats perched above them.

“So… this is where you lot live now?”

James followed his gaze, then pointed. “Yeah — up there. Above the chemist.”

Regulus couldn’t suppress a faint smile. There was something so absurd about it — James Potter, golden boy of Gryffindor, not even knowing how to fuel a car, now living above a chemist in Muggle London.

But then he returned to the matter at hand. He just… needed to get the words out. It should be Regulus telling him, and no one else.

He drew in a breath, braced himself. His fingers were still threaded through James’s.

And then he said it.

“I’m getting engaged to Isa.”

Silence.

Regulus didn’t look at him, he didn’t *dare* look at him. But he heard it just the same — a sharp, uneven inhale.

“Is it…” James began, voice barely audible, “your decision?”

The sting behind Regulus’s eyes sharpened instantly.

He laughed — bitter and flat. “What do you think, James?”

Now he turned, finally meeting James's eyes — and saw that they were filled with tears.

The sight slammed the air out of his lungs. His breath hitched. And then the dam broke.

He hadn't cried for such a long time. Excluding that subconscious moment during the Ritual, he hadn't shed a single tear for months. He couldn't even remember the last time he'd felt the tears streaming down his face.

But now he felt it. Felt it coming out of him in a trembling wave. Felt his shoulders shaking, his tears spilling silently down his cheeks. Felt the burning in his throat. Felt the way all the pain and the grief he couldn't put into words, flooded out of him, like floodwater breaching its banks.

He cried for the person beside him, in his arms. The person who deserved all the love and happiness the world possibly had to offer. He cried for the person he'd kneel for instead — his best friend who deserved to marry the man she truly loved. And he cried for himself, too, because for the first time in his life, he felt that he deserved more, too. For the first time in his life he felt that he was deserving of love. Deserving of happiness.

So he would have to fight for it — tooth and nail, soul and skin. And he would likely have to give his life for it. Because some redemptions came at a price, and some were worth everything.

Oh, to have him so near, to touch him— only to lose him again.

James reached for him instantly. Their foreheads pressed together, hands still interlaced. Tears smudged between them, the pain in one drop merging with the pain in the next — his grief bleeding into James's, and James's into his, until it was impossible to tell where one ended and the other began.

Regulus had no idea how long they sat there, hands intertwined, faces pressed so closely to each other that neither knew whose tears were whose, and their lips so close they only needed a little nudge, less than an inch to touch, to kiss…

But they didn't.

Outside the car, Lupin gripped Sirius's sleeve, whispering urgently, tugging him away despite his brother's obvious reluctance — it was

clear in the way he hovered, half-turning back. The way he shook his head, seemed to urge Lupin to let him go.

Regulus would have seen all of this, but he didn't look. Instead he cried until there was nothing left. Eventually, the tide receded and the water found its level again — or had just simply dried up. James gently cupped his face, thumbs brushing the wet line of his jaw. A small smile broke on both their faces. Faint, helpless, wry and warm all at once.

James kissed his forehead. Then, with visible effort, Regulus stepped out of the car, the door shutting behind him with a soft click. He took a deep breath and walked away, still holding the echo of James's hand in his own.

*****

Having learnt from his mistake, Regulus ducked into a quiet alley. After taking some time to compose himself, he slipped on the robes he'd stuffed into the extendable pocket of his trousers and Apparated straight into Diagon Alley. By the time his boots hit the cobbled street, only fifteen minutes remained before the post office shut for the evening. Sure, the place would open for him — the Black heir — at any hour, day or night, but that would inevitably draw attention.

And the last thing he needed was drawing attention.

So, he walked quickly. The post office was small and faintly dusty. Rows of brass caged lined the back wall, most of them empty at this hour. A single witch sat at a writing desk in the far corner, quill scratching as she muttered to herself. The only other soul was the postmaster, an older wizard with thinning hair and kind eyes.

Unsurprisingly, the wizard recognised him immediately.

"Mr Black," he said at once, straightening up behind the counter. "How can I be of service this evening?"

Regulus nodded curtly. "I'd like to send a letter."

"Of course, of course. I've a selection of owls ready — long-distance, high-security — take your pick. I've also got—"

Regulus shifted awkwardly on his feet. "That one's fine," he said, nodding at a medium-sized tawny with bright eyes.

“Excellent choice. Any specifics, sir?”

Regulus shook his head. “It’s already sealed. No need for any additional charms.”

He’d ensured the letter could only be opened by the intended recipient. The spellwork had been difficult, but he’d risen to the challenge and had thankfully succeeded.

“Very well,” the postmaster said. “No last-minute tweaking then, I suppose.”

Regulus offered him a stiff, perfunctory smile as he handed over the roll of parchment. “No, that won’t be necessary.”

He could recite the words by heart now — could probably even recite it in death.

To Eleanor Valaine,

In my possession I have both your engagement ring and something far more valuable. Meet me on the 25th of July at noon, at The Rusty Nail, Whitechapel.

You must come alone. No escort, no surveillance — magical, nor Muggle. I’ll know if you don’t comply.

Should there be even the faintest trace of detection, the meeting will not happen. You’ll forfeit your ring, and with it, the only opportunity to receive what I have to offer.

This opportunity will not come again.

Chapter 2: Of Polyjuices & Rendez-Vous

Chapter Notes

> Thank you SO much for all your wonderful comments! For someone who's received their first ever comment perhaps like 50k words in, it was so precious to wake up to so many comments. They're such a joy to read and so validating and motivating, so thank you, thank you!!
>
> I don't have much to say other than... enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Can I ask you a question?”

Isa raised an eyebrow, her hand pausing mid-stir over her coffee.

“Is it about our… trip?” she asked cautiously.

Regulus didn’t miss the way her attention shifted — a little too intently — to the breakfast muffins Whiskerley had laid out on the Black Manor kitchen table.

He hadn’t told her anything about Morocco, only that she should keep ten days in August free and that he’d make sure to take her on the trip of her life. He realised he’d set the bar rather high — especially for someone who’d already travelled halfway across the world before turning twenty — but he intended to make good on the promise.

They were thrown into this together. Forced into this together. Regulus knew very well that if given the choice, Isa would have married the love of her life – who, incidentally, wasn’t him but rather the Ravenclaw Head Boy Regulus had once saved from certain death at the hands of Isa’s father.

But this was their world and this was what was expected. Besides, apart from knowing that his best friend deserved the best he could possibly offer, he truly couldn’t afford a single misstep right now. Not with the plan about to take off.

So he was going to marry Isa. And he was going to make the very best of it for her every step of the way.

“No,” he replied, finally. “It’s not about the trip. And… it’s actually

more of a request than a question."

Isa looked intrigued now, setting her spoon down, giving him her full attention.

Regulus cleared his throat and stirred his coffee as well, more for the sake of doing something with his hands. Oh, he'd planned this for weeks… He just needed her approval, her cooperation…

"Would you be willing to… lend your body for a day?"

Isa blinked. Her mouth fell slightly open in a mix of alarm and confusion. Regulus winced.

"Er—" he added quickly, jabbing a finger awkwardly in the air as if to separate himself from the suggestion. "I mean… as in, have someone *impersonate* you."

This, judging by Isa's still-thoroughly-baffled expression, didn't particularly help.

"This has something to do with Miller, doesn't it?"

Regulus scratched the back of his neck sheepishly. "It might."

Isa let out a snort. "Oh, Crouch is going to have a *field day* when he hears about this."

*****

"You really sure this is a good idea, Reg?"

They stepped out from the cover of a narrow alley onto the street, Isa fumbling with a cheap Muggle umbrella as the rain came down in sheets. Regulus rolled his eyes, took it from her hands without a word, and popped it open with a deft flick. He held it above them both as they started walking.

"Yes," he said.

Isa shot him a sceptical look. "You don't see the issue in us traipsing off to this godforsaken outskirt of the country? What are we doing here?"

"Well," Regulus said, "would *you* give your daughter — who's just turned fourteen — away to a seventeen-year-old bloke for the day, without having laid eyes on him even once?"

Isa was quiet for a beat, then exhaled. “Yes, well, when you put it like that… But why do *I* have to be here?”

Regulus cast her a sideways glance. “Again, Ies — would you give your fourteen-year-old daughter to a seventeen-year-old boy without immediately assuming the worst?”

“Ah,” she said dryly, “so I’m the appeasing factor in this ridiculous scheme.”

“Yes,” he replied. “You are.”

They walked in silence for a few more minutes, their footsteps slapping softly on the wet pavement. Eventually, Regulus slowed, coming to a stop in front of a squat, red-bricked house with a crooked chimney and a faded pebble-dash façade. The windows were curtained in mustard-yellow lace, the garden overgrown and bordered with cracked concrete slabs. A rusting bike leaned against the side wall, and if the number hadn’t been enough, the several footballs scattered about the little garden confirmed that this was indeed Miller’s house.

“Number fourteen,” Regulus murmured. “This must be it.”

He adjusted the umbrella slightly so it covered Isa better, gave her a brief, unreadable look — and then, with all the ceremony of someone stepping into the start of a storm, he drew a deep breath.

“All right, then. Here we go.”

It turned out Miller was almost an exact copy of her father. They shared the same warm, ruddy cheeks, the same round eyes and the same unapologetic cheerfulness.

Mr Miller greeted them at the door with a broad smile and an offer of tea, and the only thing slightly dulling Regulus’s discomfort — or, putting it into perspective, really — was the utter awkwardness radiating off Isa. She took in the surroundings with quiet disbelief. Regulus couldn’t really blame her. Isa had been raised in homes that looked more like palaces than houses, with marble floors, sunlight pouring in through high glass domes, a different set of china for every occasion and a small army of House Elves seeing to every need.

Well, this place was a world apart.

Miller’s home was likely no bigger than the kitchens of Isa’s Damascus estate. The front room had mismatched furniture, threadbare

cushions, and a faint scent of morning toast that lingered in the air. The carpet was worn, and little bits of trumpery were everywhere — framed photos, postcards stuck to the mantelpiece, half-finished crossword books on the armrest. Cosy, but cluttered.

Regulus of course wasn't exactly a seasoned visitor to the Muggle world, but thanks to Marie-Anne, he had a good bit more exposure than Isa, who had never so much as set foot in a Muggle home. This became abundantly clear when they sat down at the tiny kitchen table, and Isa — after a cautious glance around the laminate counters and the yellowing lace curtains — leaned in and whispered, "Is this how Muggles live?"

Regulus stifled a snort, quickly turning it into a polite smile just as the Millers re-entered the room with a tray of tea and a tin of assorted biscuits.

"Where's Dan?" Miller asked, glancing at her father.

"Oh, he's upstairs. He'll come down soon," Mr Miller replied, setting down the tray and pouring the tea. He offered them each a cup of milky, steaming tea and pushed the biscuit tin forward.

"Thanks very much," Regulus said, accepting the tea with a nod. Isa murmured her thanks as well. If he hadn't felt so out of place himself, he would've laughed at the way Isa was trying to find footing in this situation — which, truth he told, wasn't going all that well. She was fidgeting nervously with the hem of her Muggle dress, and her smile came off a bit too forced.

She cleared her throat delicately. "Who's Dan?"

"My little brother," said Miller, a bit flustered by having both Regulus and Isa sitting across from her at the kitchen table. Still, Regulus knew she thought it was worth it. It was a small price to pay for the rest of the day.

Isa nodded with a small smile. "You have a younger brother? How old is he?"

"Nine," Mr Miller replied. "We reckon he'll be off to Hogwarts in a couple of years too — he's been blowing things up since he was a toddler. Bit like Lotte here."

Miller blushed at the mention of her dad's pet name for her, ducking her head and pretending to stir her tea.

Just then, the kitchen door creaked open and a small boy peeked in. He had dark hair and the same curious green eyes as Miller. His posture illustrated he wasn't sure whether to come in or bolt altogether. Eventually, with some gentle guidance from Mr Miller, he settled down at the table and joined the conversation which mostly consisted of Mr Miller sharing anecdotes about his late wife and his daughter, making Miller bury her face in her hands out of embarrassment on several occasions.

Eventually, though, Regulus glanced at the clock and announced they had to leave. He shook Mr Miller's hand firmly in the hallway.

"I'll get her back safe and sound before dark," Regulus reassured him.

Mr Miller smiled. "Thank you. Lotte's said a lot about you — about how you've taken her under your wing. Means a lot, you know, with her not having grown up with all this magic business…"

Regulus returned the smile. "She's brilliant company — and she's got a real talent for Quidditch too."

Mr Miller laughed. "That'll be from her mum, then. She always was the sporty type."

"Okay, Dad," Miller interjected, clearly very eager to leave. "We have to go now."

Regulus turned to her with a smirk. "Ever Apparated before, Miller?"

*****

"This is your *house*?" Miller gasped, looking both awe-struck and slightly appalled. "Like… this is where you *live*?"

"Well, that is the standard definition of a house, isn't it?" Regulus replied dryly, guiding her from the estate's wrought-iron gates towards the grand front steps.

Miller, still mildly green around the gills from her first side-along Apparition, had clearly forgotten her nausea at the sight of Black Manor.

"But…" she trailed off weakly as they stepped inside. "This… this *can't* be your house."

Regulus gave a small shrug. "Used to be my uncle's. Got passed on to

me when he died."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Miller said at once, her tone shifting to genuine sympathy.

She'd told him quite a bit about her own family — about her mum, who had passed just before she started Hogwarts; her grandparents, who'd helped raise her in the aftermath; about her dad, a construction worker; her little brother, who was obsessed with dragons. She'd spoken about their low-key holidays, their seaside trips an hour's drive away because there was never quite enough money for what she called a 'proper vacation'.

Regulus, by contrast, had offered little in return. She knew about Sirius — the strained situation between them — but everything else she'd had to glean from the tireless Hogwarts rumour mill.

And it didn't take long for Regulus to realise Miller hadn't managed to glean all that much.

"So…," she said, glancing around the cavernous entrance hall, clearly unsure where to rest her gaze, "am I going to meet your parents too?"

Regulus's eyes widened slightly in alarm, and he didn't miss Isa's sharp inhale at the very suggestion.

"Err," he coughed, "they're… out."

Just the thought of Walburga and Orion Black discovering Miller — *Miller* — in Black Manor… The consequences would be astronomical. Dancing with her at the end-of-term Ball had been reckless enough. He'd always told himself their friendship was incidental — necessary, even — for the sake of team dynamics, for the Cup.

It was already bad enough that he'd once knocked the living daylights out of Crabbe over her. The waltzing — done purely to prove a point to Miller's daft friends — had definitely edged into dangerous territory. But bringing Miller — the only Muggleborn in Slytherin — into *Black premises*?

Oh, Bellatrix would flay him alive.

But, he'd promised Miller to take her to a real, professional Quidditch match once, and he knew that this would likely by his last quiet summer — the proverbial silence before the storm, the dull before the chaos. So when he'd spotted a Puddlemere United versus Montrose

Magpies match scheduled just two days after Miller's birthday, he'd taken it as a sign.

Still, letting Miller into Black Manor was treacherous enough, but to be seen with her in *public*, at a public event like a Quidditch match… That was suicide. So, there was only one solution — as unorthodox as may be.

"All right," Regulus said once they'd reached the kitchen. "We need to leave in thirty minutes."

Isa nodded, handing Miller a goblet.

Miller eyed the thick, mud-coloured liquid with a mix of suspicion and mild horror. Her distaste only grew when Isa theatrically dropped a single, glinting strand of golden hair into it, causing the potion to fizz and shift to a gleaming gold.

"Well then," Isa smirked, "bottoms up, Miller."

Regulus had seen his fair share of oddities in life — but there was something uniquely disturbing about Miller in Isa's body. She'd taken on the hair, the face, the voice… and yet, all her quirks remained. Her mannerisms, her tone, her oddly specific choice of words — it was still Miller, just wrapped in Isa's skin.

The plan had been tricky — properly tricky — and Regulus had spent over a month preparing it, brewing the potion in secret. There was only one way to take Miller with, and that was for her to be either invisible or someone else. As he — unlike some — had no Invisibility Cloak, the choice had been obvious.

Still, the risk was real.

A match like this was always fodder for the *Prophet's* society pages — or worse, those ghastly gossip rags like *Witch Weekly*. Regulus hadn't been seen publicly since the Christmas Ball at Cissy's, and he knew full well that the press were dying for new photos of the young Black heir.

Turning up with Isa — who, of course, wasn't Isa at all — would only fan the flames. The rumours about their supposed relationship had been floating around for years, drifting steadily into the bizarre. With this came the problem that Isa had been trained since birth in how to walk, how to sit, how to look approachable and untouchable at the same time. You couldn't teach that in twenty minutes.

Regulus had warned Miller to speak only when absolutely necessary — and even then, with caution. Still, he felt deeply on edge once they were finally settled in the box.

Below them, the crowd roared like a living beast. Banners waved, enchanted fireworks cracked in team colours, and the players soared out onto the pitch to deafening cheers. Compared to Hogwarts, this was another world entirely.

And then, seeing Miller's face, he knew it was worth it. Knew what he had done it for. Knew what he had risked it for.

She was completely enraptured, her eyes wide, her lips parted in utter amazement. He had never seen such awe, so much excitement on someone's face. He took in the sight — savoured it, soaked it in, relished it.

And it was a good thing he did, because eventually, that look of pure, awe-struck joy and gratitude — it'd turn into a dagger, jabbing his heart, cutting his soul into pieces.

*****

"So, does Miller have a bright future in theatre?" Isa asked with a smirk, turning down the wireless and pulling a cigarette from her coat pocket.

As yet another grey day soaked the manor in comfortless rain, they were resigned to spending the afternoon indoors. They sat in the drawing room, where Whikerley had just served steaming tea, an assortment of biscuits, and — especially for Isa — a generous plate of éclairs.

Regulus groaned at the memory of the match and Miller's best attempt at impersonating Isa — which, truth be told, had left something to be desired. "No. We managed to avoid most people, but… it wasn't easy."

Isa snorted, lighting the cigarette with her wand, and took a long drag.

"We ran into one of your father's colleagues," Regulus added, eyeing the cigarette with distaste. "He didn't look too thrilled that Isadora Nott had apparently forgotten him."

"Oh, that's good news then," Isa said breezily, exhaling smoke. "I don't think I've ever met one of my father's colleagues who wasn't an

absolute bore."

Regulus let out a snort and waved the smoke away from his face.

"Oh, don't make a fuss, Reg," she said, flicking ash into a tray. "This is my last one — can't wait to get my hands on fresh cigarettes in Damascus. Especially now Evans has graduated."

Regulus gave a small huff, thinking about that odd alliance between Isadora Nott and Lily Evans, forged entirely for the sake of Muggle cigarettes.

"You're off to Damascus tomorrow?" he asked.

Isa nodded. "Yes. Until… you know."

A strange silence settled between them. They both knew how that sentence ended. Until Regulus would come to fetch her for their engagement trip.

For a brief moment, it looked as though Isa might actually bring it up, might actually address that big, fat elephant in the room. Aside from that evening following dinner with her parents — when the engagement expectation had been made painfully explicit — neither of them had spoken about it since. Hadn't discussed what it would mean for them, as best friends, to be engaged. What it meant to marry. Hadn't discussed how truly unfair it all was — that they weren't allowed to love the people they truly loved. That instead they had to marry each other, twisting their platonic friendship into something it was never meant to be. And hadn't discussed how conflicting it was that — despite all of this — they should be grateful. Because it could be worse. At least they liked each other. At least they weren't strangers, or worse — enemies…

It was very unlike Isa to leave such things unsaid. Usually, she'd have poked and prodded the elephant until it fell over.

And yet, once again, she didn't touch upon it but instead veered somewhere entirely unexpected.

"Will you be careful, Reg?" she asked quietly.

He looked over at her. "Careful?"

"I know you like Miller—"

Regulus shot her a sharp look.

Isa gave him a knowing smile. “Not like *that*. But you like her — as a friend. Still… don’t forget who you are. And who she is. If the wrong people find out…”

He didn’t reply. She was right. He’d always walked the edge with Miller. It was a miracle no one knew about him punching Crabbe, or that his dancing with her at the end-of-year ball hadn’t reached anyone in the family.

And especially now, with everything he was planning, he couldn’t afford even a whiff of scandal. No gossip, no questions, no suspicions. He needed to stay low — only present when required.

And even though some furious part of him wanted to say *sod it all*, to not give a fig about anything, he knew he had to pull back. If he wanted to keep her as a friend, he had to draw the line and keep their friendship as private as possible.

Isa sighed, taking another long drag. “It feels like we’re at a crossroads.”

Regulus shook his head slightly. “I think we already passed the crossroads, Ies.”

She raised an eyebrow at him. “What do you mean?”

“Well,” he said slowly, “everything changed with the Dementor attack.”

“Mmm,” Isa murmured. “Yes. But it didn’t quite… trigger the chain reaction you’d expect, did it? I mean, Minchum’s still sitting comfortably.”

“True,” Regulus said. “But only through brute force. And he’s made a lot of enemies.”

Isa looked at him sidelong. “Enemies?”

“Well…” he began, “discontent among the modernists — especially the radical ones — has been simmering for ages. But once it became clear Minchum couldn’t even control the Dementors… that was it. The final blow. And a symbolic one too — Azkaban’s always been their lynchpin.”

He paused, remembering the many letters in the Prophet — which was only the tip of the iceberg, as the more radical points of view would never be published in such a conformist newspaper.

“But instead of owning up to it — admitting fault, or even pretending to learn from it — they’ve gone on the offensive. Attacking anyone who dares question them.”

A small, contemplative silence followed.

Regulus exhaled. “So now the Ministry’s made itself two enemies. The Death Eaters — who want to install their own regime, and the modernists — who want to counter the Death Eaters too, but not like Minchum has been trying to do. Add to that the anti-authoritarians, who oppose the entire direction the Ministry’s taken — this tightening grip under the guise of fighting the threat.”

Although the Dementor attack hadn’t gone the way the Revolutionaries had wanted to — or well, that was what he was *told* at least — with instead of a few Dementors slipping through, tens and tens of the creatures flooding the Hogwarts grounds, there had been one objective effectively achieved: chaos.

They hadn’t known what would come of it — it had been a gamble. No one could have predicted either Minchum’s or the public’s reaction. In the worst case, it could have turned public opinion drastically against the Revolutionaries. But instead, they’d been lucky: no one truly believed the Revolutionaries were behind it. In a twisted sort of irony, people argued it couldn’t possibly be them as it would’ve been the worst move PR-wise.

This meant all arrows pointed to the Minchum administration, and rather than resigning, the government had chosen to tighten the noose. With all the consequences.

Pulling himself from his thoughts, he looked at Isa, who was eyeing him warily.

“The world’s chaos, Ies. We passed the crossroads long ago.” He sighed. “Now it’s just… chaos.”

*****

Regulus blocked out most of the chaos unfolding in the wizarding world — he had two far more pressing matters to attend to, both tied to the plan: his upcoming trip to Morocco with Isa, and his meeting

with Valaine.

He made his way to the pub in Whitechapel surprisingly composed. There was a flicker of anxiety — *so* much depended on this conversation — but his heart wasn't thundering in his chest, nor was he sweating through his shirt. He wasn't certain Valaine would actually come alone, as requested in the letter, but something told him she would. She'd be too intrigued to risk messing it up. Besides, she was a formidable witch; she surely knew that in a worst-case scenario, she could hold her own.

For the first time in ages, he walked with the Mark exposed and, due to his t-shirt, visible for the entire world to see. The Mark had become something sour — like a rot he couldn't cut out, a wrong he could never make right again. Even alone, he usually cast a concealment charm over it, if only to avoid the constant visible reminder of his choices. The charm's discomfort, however, was still reminder enough. No matter what he did, he could never outrun it entirely.

But today, the Mark served a purpose. It gave him power, leverage. And so, he walked to the pub with his head held high and his arm stretched out.

The pub was a shabby, dim-lit place that blended into the grimy, industrial sprawl of this part of London. Regulus had passed it that time he went ice-skating with Marie-Anne.

A worn wooden bar held the centre of the room, the rest filled with battered tables and mismatched chairs. The barman barely glanced up from his Muggle paper, only pausing to tap his cigarette into the ashtray. Two construction workers — by the look of them — were knocking back pints and helping themselves to salted crisps. At the far end, three regulars were already well into their drinks.

It was, in all, the last place anyone would expect to find Regulus Black — which was precisely why he'd chosen it.

He had just taken a seat when the door opened again and Valaine stepped inside.

She was dressed in a long Muggle dress, black hair cascading down her back. As always, there was something about her — something commanding and undeniably formidable. Her piercing green eyes swept across the pub, pausing briefly on each table before landing on Regulus. Something unreadable flickered in her gaze.

Despite the strange situation, Regulus didn't forget his manners. He rose and pulled out the chair for her. The barman looked up again, dropping the indifference and instead turning curious. Regulus didn't blame him. Though both he and Valaine wore Muggle clothing, it was painfully obvious they didn't quite belong. Even if they could pass as Muggles, they were the posh kind of people, the kind that had no reason to set foot in a place like this.

Regulus and Valaine sat opposite each other, silent for a moment, locked in each other's gaze. Regulus had to remind himself why he was here — that it was him in control, that this was his move, not hers. Still, under her fierce stare, it took considerable effort not to squirm.

Valaine spoke first, her voice clear and strong.

"So. It *was* you, in Hohenhain."

Regulus nodded. "It was."

Her eyes dropped to the Mark. "You're actually a Death Eater," she said, baffled.

"I'm surprised you didn't know," he replied evenly, ignoring the sting of the distaste in her eyes as they lingered on the skull on his forearm. "Seeing as you were engaged to Victor."

Her eyes flicked upwards, unreadable. "You worked that out, then?"

"Well, yes. Something about you made me think of him. And then the initials on the ring…"

"V.C.T.," she breathed quietly. "Victor Christopher Thorne."

Regulus nodded. "I checked the register, didn't find any marriage record, so I assumed you were engaged, not married."

"We were," Valaine said quietly. "With his… line of work, we preferred to stay as anonymous as possible."

Silence stretched between them.

"He never shared much about his missions," she continued eventually. "Sometimes he'd give me the gist, but never the details. I knew what he was infiltrating. And in the final weeks of his life — or at least, the last time I saw him — I noticed the Mark. I knew he was… interested

in you specifically. But he never told me you were branded too. Never told me you were one of them."

"But you suspected."

She gave a short nod. "I did. I looked into your family. The situation with your disinherited brother. It made sense — they'd want someone at Hogwarts, someone to keep an eye out. And who better than a pupil?"

A group of men walked in, taking a table near the bar. Regulus barely glanced over.

"There were other candidates, of course," Valaine went on. "Mulciber, Avery, Rosier… But they were all too eager. Or too thick. You stood out — sharp, quiet, like you can read a room better than most adults. And you're far too talented with a wand for someone your age. And then your unexplained absences from school…"

She leaned forward slightly. "And of course, the little detail where a certain guard at Hohenhain somehow knew I was skilled in wandless magic."

Unbidden, Regulus's mind snapped to the last minutes of Hohenhain. To that Auror lifting his wand, and Valaine's voice.

"No — no — don't!"

"Why did you save me?" Regulus asked.

Valaine gave a huff, but there was a flicker of something else behind it. "You were a student, Regulus. A minor. Merlin knows how you ended up in Hohenhain — that place is the last a sixteen-year-old Hogwarts student should ever be — but the fact is, you were... and still are... a teenager."

Silence followed.

Something in him stirred — a quiet warning that this wasn't the whole truth. That she was holding something back. He had far more pressing issues on his mind than that particular event long past, so he let it go.

A truly stupid decision. A truly, *truly* stupid decision, for it would have been life-saving if he hadn't. Oh, how that moment would come back to bite him…

Valaine's voice dropped, her eyes brimming with more emotion than he'd ever seen from her.

"What… happened to him? I've heard — through channels — that he was killed. But I've never known how."

Regulus hesitated.

She deserved to know. Deserved to know how her fiancé had died. Deserved to know that, even in his final moments, Thorne had been calm, composed — still the one giving orders, still pulling the strings. She deserved to know that he'd spent those last minutes advising Regulus, guiding him. That, in the very end, he'd held his head high and looked Regulus straight in the eye when the Killing Curse hit.

She deserved to know that the boy now sitting across from her, in a grimy pub in East London, had been the one to cast that spell.

But he didn't tell her.

He told himself she'd never agree to see him again if she knew — and he needed her, for the plan. But even he had to admit to himself, deep down, that wasn't the whole truth. The deeper reason was the fear — the fear of those green eyes dissecting him, the fear of her gaze peeling back every layer of guilt and shame embedded in his soul.

"He was killed, yes," Regulus said quietly. "But he didn't suffer. There was no pain. Just… a Killing Curse."

Another silence fell between them. Regulus looked away — mostly to hide the shame written across his face. Valaine likely took it as him giving her space, as a moment of privacy to sit with the news.

Then, after a beat, she cleared her throat.

"I appreciate you telling me." Her voice was more composed now, though still quiet. "Now — Regulus Black — tell me. What are we doing here?"

Regulus took a breath. "Do you consider yourself a modernist?"

She looked briefly surprised. "Well. I don't consider myself a bloodpurist or a bigot. So… I suppose for some, that makes me a modernist."

"Are you aligned with Dumbledore?"

She hesitated — visibly weighing the question — before answering at last.

“Not formally.” A brief silence stretched. “You know how this works, Regulus,” she added, leaning back slightly. “If you want me to give, you’ll need to offer something in return.”

Regulus’s eyes pointedly flicked to the Mark on his arm. “I’ve got plenty to offer. But there’s some ground we need to cover first.”

She considered him again, then gave a brief nod. “All right. No — I’m not officially tied to Albus Dumbledore.”

Regulus thought about this for a moment. “But Victor was?”

She shook her head. “No. Victor worked on certain operations that happened to benefit Dumbledore. But never at his request.”

Regulus frowned slightly in confusion. Valaine picked up on it and continued.

“We met at a boarding school in Switzerland — long before either of us started working in this world. We were together for fifteen years. Victor came from a family of mercenaries, and when the time came, we chose that path together.”

“So you just… work on commission for whoever pays you?” Regulus asked.

A faint smile touched her lips. “True loyalty can’t be bought, Regulus. We’ve always worked for causes that align with our beliefs. The advantage of hiring us is that we’re unaffiliated. We’re not tied to any ministry. We aren’t bound by whatever policy a government has decided to impose that year.”

Something in Regulus stirred — a jolt of excitement in his chest. This was precisely what he’d hoped to hear. He hadn’t come across the Valaine or Thorne names in any recent British wizarding records, which suggested they were either not native or had left the country long ago. Victor had once mentioned his connection to the governor, whose family had settled in Turkey generations ago. All of it — the absence from local records, the foreign ties, the independence — pointed to something… extraordinary. All of it had made him suspect that they weren’t just modernist sympathisers operating under Dumbledore’s banner.

And he had been right. They were mercenaries. This was perfect.

“So,” he asked carefully, “what is it that keeps you fighting now?”

Valaine’s expression softened for a second. “Continuing Victor’s work,” she said quietly. “So, I suppose… love.”

Regulus stilled for a moment, trying to shake off the uneasy feeling that answer left him with.

“So if I’m right… you’d be able to pass on information to the modernists — discreetly — without the source ever needing to contact Dumbledore directly?”

Valaine froze now, her gaze sharpening. She studied him intently. “Are you implying what I think you’re implying, Regulus?”

“I think I am.”

Her eyes dropped briefly to the Mark on his arm.

“You’re… switching sides?”

Regulus shifted uncomfortably at the phrasing — the implication that he was siding with Dumbledore, of all people. He gave a small shake of his head.

“No. I wouldn’t call myself a modernist. I don’t belong to Dumbledore’s camp.”

Valaine arched an eyebrow. “But?”

“But I can’t, in good conscience, follow the Dark Lord anymore.”

She narrowed her eyes slightly. “Which means?”

“Which means,” Regulus said carefully, “that I want to do whatever I can to undermine him. His hunger for power has become… dangerous. And I fear he’ll stop at nothing.”

What he didn’t say was that simply undermining the Dark Lord didn’t come close to capturing the full scope of what he was planning.

Valaine took this in — the silence between them stretching before realisation crossed her face.

“So it *was* the Death Eaters behind the Dementor attack,” she said at

last.

Regulus raised an eyebrow. “You hadn’t figured that out yet?”

She huffed. “Of course we *thought* we knew… But now, at least, I have it confirmed.”

Silence settled between them until Valaine continued.

“So,” she said slowly, “you want to pass on information from the Dark Lord’s camp to the modernists?”

Their eyes locked. The silence was extremely taut and unnerving.

“I do,” Regulus said eventually.

Another pause followed.

“But I have a few conditions.”

Valaine’s expression shifted — curiosity now edged with intrigue.

“I’m listening.”

“Dumbledore knows I’m a Death Eater,” Regulus said.

Her eyebrows arched.

“I’m sure the Potters know, and they’ll have told him.”

“And how do you know that the Potters know?” she asked, her voice sharp.

Regulus shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He didn’t know for sure, of course, but Thorne had been there when he received the Mark and had told the Potters about Davies. Surely he had told them about the Inauguration, too.

“That’s irrelevant, at least for now,” Regulus decided to answer. “But take it from me — Dumbledore knows, and he has definitely noticed the suspicious nature of my absences from Hogwarts. The important thing is that I need free rein to leave the castle when necessary.”

Valaine gave a questioning look.

“It’s crucial I spend as much time around the Death Eaters — around *Him* — as possible. The more I see, the more I can report.”

Once again, Regulus withheld the fuller truth. Withheld the fact that the absences weren't just for gathering information, but to carry out his own plans that he couldn't risk letting either the Revolutionaries or Modernists catch wind of.

"There's another condition," he went on. "You can tell Dumbledore you have an informant, but he mustn't know it's me. No one must. That means, too, that you'll have to come up with a reason for my absences. Make it credible."

Valaine leaned back in her chair, arms crossing. "There's more."

Regulus nodded. "One more thing. And this one… Everything depends on it. If this isn't guaranteed, or if it fails even once, I will walk away. No more information, no more access to anything the Dark Lord decides."

He looked her dead in the eyes.

"Under any and all circumstances, I want Isa's safety guaranteed."

Something flickered across Valaine's face at the mention of her former pupil.

"Isadora Nott?"

He nodded. "No one comes near her. No one touches her. The moment someone as much as lays a hand on her, it's over."

Valaine's eyes narrowed slightly. "And who is Isadora Nott to you, then?"

Regulus exhaled deeply. "She's going to be my wife."

A silence settled over the table.

Valaine looked contemplative. Then, slowly: "You've got a lot of fierce conditions, Regulus Black — especially for someone who hasn't made entirely clear what he's offering."

Regulus's voice was steady. "Victor spent years infiltrating pureblood circles, and the modernists lost him. Dumbledore lost him. I was born into those circles. I am one of the first twelve official Death Eaters. I gain nothing from this — and yet I'm offering everything. I'm offering you the future of the wizarding world."

Another thick silence fell.

Eventually, Valaine sighed. “All right,” she said. “But it can’t be me.”

Regulus blinked. “What?”

“I’m not reliable enough for this — not in the logistical sense. I have too many missions, too much travel. I’ll set everything in motion, but I can’t be the one you report to.”

His heart sank. He hadn’t planned for this. If he was honest, he hadn’t planned much beyond getting her to say yes.

Valaine noticed. “Don’t worry. I have someone in mind. She’s UK-based, unlike me. She’s plenty available, and just as capable.”

Regulus held back his scepticism. He highly doubted that someone could be as capable, as fearless as Valaine. He bit his tongue and another quiet moment passed.

“Why are you doing this, Regulus?” she asked eventually. “You say it’s about Voldemort’s thirst for power—”

Regulus barely managed to hide the fact that the name sent a jolt through him — the name that had been dominating the newspapers since this summer.

“—but why are you *really* doing this?”

Unbidden, his mind flashed to Isa. To Sirius. And then — to James. The glint of mischief in his eyes. The smirk that danced on his lips. The stroke of his finger down Regulus’s spine. The press of his lips against Regulus’s own.

Regulus let out a long breath.

“Well,” he said. “I suppose, like you… for love, too.”

Chapter End Notes

Gosh, i love Miller.

Also, you might notice some style differences. I'm trying to cut down the m-dashes in the fic (god i use them WAY too much) and I've done some research regarding British style things. I've changed Mr. Nott into Mr Nott, for example, and will use Miss instead of Ms. etc. I also didn't know that whiskey is the American spelling and whisky the British one, so I'll gradually change that throughout the fic, too (I'm not a native English speaker

unfortunately so there's always these things that'll need changing).

As always, curious what you think!

Miller was Milling and the plan is planninggggg.

Chapter 3: Of Bedouins & Unions

Chapter Notes

> Again, all of you wonderful people, thank you so much for the comments! It's so nice and validating and exciting to have engaging readers. You guys are the absolute best! ❤

> Then, without further ado, the chapter we've all been waiting for.... ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He had known her all his life. Naturally, they'd been babies at first, so he had no memory of their first meeting — but her presence had always been there, a constant.

First, she was the mouthy daughter he was routinely thrown in with at every stiff, stifling event he and Sirius were dragged along to. The ones where they were expected to sit straight, nod, smile politely, and otherwise disappear into the background. Isa never truly disappeared, though. She was too pretty for that, even then. Besides, she always found Sirius. The two of them would coax sweets from the House Elves or would dare each other to make things explode by willpower alone, protected by the adults' faulty assumption that, as kids, their magic still wasn't fully in control.

She was the girl who'd visit from her new home in Damascus over the holidays, only to be forced into playing doll in one of Cissy's self-important productions. The girl who'd seen the silent war playing out on Regulus's face when Sirius had asked him to join his compartment on the Hogwarts Express — and who had said, firmly, "No, Sirius, we're sitting together," before dragging him down the corridor to find an empty one.

She was the one who always sat beside him in class, the one he studied with in the library, the one who secretly signed him up for Quidditch try-outs in second year. His only friend who truly understood the world he came from, because she had been born into it, too. Yes, Evan was a Rosier, but with the unconditional love and kindness that he was showered in by his parents, he'd never truly understand. But Isa did. She knew better than anyone what it was like to grow up under crushing expectations. Knew how it felt to strive and strive, only for it to never be quite good enough.

The Spare and the Girl — neither of them the heir the family truly wanted.

And in these past few years, he'd come to know her even more intimately. They had seen into each other's minds, felt the rawest of thoughts and emotions. They had held each other, naked and breathless. They had fought, cried, kissed. She'd helped her through the first public appearance after becoming the Heir. She'd been the only one who he'd told his deepest, rawest secret — whom he'd told about James.

And he'd helped her, too, to navigate this maze of expectations, secrets and heartache. He'd risked his own life to save the love of hers. He'd easily, without hesitation, give his life for hers, too. Because she was his best friend, and he knew her better than anyone.

Which was why, when he came to collect her for Morocco, the sudden, excruciating awkwardness between them was all the more disconcerting.

They had seen it coming for years. Had heard the speculations — Regulus for the first time behind a pillar at Dreadmoor Keep, when Father had discussed it with Druella — and understood why.

The two most powerful families in the country, uniting. The Black Heir with the Nott firstborn. Not even the union between Cissy and Lucius could compare. No, power in their world didn't wear crowns or sit on thrones — it signed its name in ink and blood, and this… this was the sort of match that reshaped family trees.

And, for once, the union made sense. They had been friends for years. The supposed Hogwarts sweethearts. Isadora Elowyn Nott, with her golden hair, full lips, and a poise that bordered on divine — and Regulus Arcturus Black, with his perfect black curls, piercing blue eyes, and more money than any seventeen-year-old in Britain.

Yes, they had known and yes, it made sense. They would spend ten days together, then return, promised to each other. They would return for their real lives to begin.

So it was no surprise that, as they stepped away from the Damascus estate and crossed the scorched gravel drive, walking side by side towards the edge of the wards where the Portkey waited, neither said a word — letting the sheer significance of the moment settle over them.

The late morning heat was already clinging mercilessly to their skin as they walked on in silence. Regulus could feel his heart pounding, drowning out the lazy birdsong drifting from the fig trees. He felt Isa's eyes flick to him now and then, but his gaze stayed fixed ahead — on the dusty path, on the destination in the distance. The silence stretched and stretched — not exactly uncomfortable, but fraught. Dense with everything unspoken.

They reached the fig tree at last. Hanging from one of its low branches was a tarnished brass astrolabe — the Portkey.

They stood before it, still silent.

Regulus reached for her hand. Her slender fingers curled into his; soft, familiar. She enclosed them around his, and instinctively, he gave a gentle squeeze. A small smile ghosted across Isa's lips — almost imperceptible — and then she nodded.

Together, they reached out with their free hands and touched the astrolabe.

*****

As all his friends, his brother, and his favourite cousin had always teased him, Regulus was a romantic.

He had seen the effects of heartbreak, of infidelity, of unrequited love far too often for someone his age. He had witnessed the political marriages, the strategic unions. He had overheard the men talk — crude boasts of their conquests. He had heard the slurred, degrading remarks about their wives over late-night brandy and mead. He'd heard the shouting, the cursing, the sound of things breaking, when Mother found out about Father's affairs for the first time. He had seen what it had done to Walburga Black — the cold meticulous woman who had once prided herself on pulling every string, commanding every room. A woman who could apparently master everyone but her own husband. And who, by blood and tradition, could never leave him. He remembered Isa's words — years ago, the first time she had truly understood why her parents fought after one of Magnus Nott's many business trips. And he'd had front-row seats to the endless lusting after and objectification of Isadora Nott.

So, he had sworn he would be different. He would be the loyal, loving, unconditionally devoted husband. He'd bring his wife roses, listen to her stories, kiss her cheeks and hands and neck and shoulders. He'd buy her anything she liked, make love to her every night. They would

be a team, they would be unstoppable.

And then James Potter had come along — with his Muggle jumpers, mischievous smirk, and that disarming tenderness — and Regulus realised that he still wanted all of that. But he no longer wanted it with a wife.

He wanted it with a boy.

It was a boy he wanted to buy flowers for. A boy whose endless stories he wanted to listen to, with a fond smile. A boy he longed to spoil, to worship, to make devastating, soul-deep love to. And no matter how much he wanted that life — no matter how fiercely he longed for it — he couldn't have it.

But he could still give it to Isa.

His best friend. The one person in the world who truly knew him. Who deserved every good and soft thing. Who loved roses, romance and passion as much as he did. And with this marriage being preordained, stipulated until the very detail already when they were still kids… then romanticising it, surprising her, making her feel wonder and delight — well, that was the only bit he still had control over.

But it did come with a challenge.

What to buy a girl who had already been given everything she could possibly dream of? Where to reside with a girl who had grown up in sprawling estates, palaces and sun-drenched courtyards? Where to travel with a girl who could flick her wand and have a portkey to anywhere in the world? And what ring to place on the finger of a girl who wore only the most exclusive diamonds — and had a personal goblin jeweller?

He had planned everything meticulously, determined to make it unforgettable. Most girls their age would have wanted to go to Greece, or St. Barts, or some other gilded island for the British rich. He might have had an ulterior motive, yes — but he took her to Morocco not just for convenience. Isa had always felt at home in places where the coffee was laced with cardamom, where you could smoke sweet shisha in tiled courtyards, and where the skies over the desert stretched wide and full of stars.

The portkey took them to the most southern part of Andalusia.

“Andalusia?” Isa had gasped, her sharp eyes scanning the narrow alleyway. It was walled in warm ochre, lined with tiled window sills and overflowing jasmine.

Regulus smiled at her deduction. Of course she’d figured it out instantly.

“It’s been ages since I was here,” she breathed, wonder in her voice.

Regulus smiled. “Ah, well, we haven’t quite arrived yet, Ies.”

No — they kept walking, through sun-dappled alleyways and over cobbled lanes, until they reached Punta de Tarifa. Isa’s breath caught as she looked across the Strait, where Morocco shimmered on the horizon.

“We’re going to Morocco?” she asked.

Regulus nodded.

“How?”

Thirty minutes later, they sat close together on a red flying carpet, cloaked in concealment charms, the wind warm and salty as it rushed past. The Strait of Gibraltar stretched below them. It was beautiful — the way the water glittered deep blue under the sun, the boats gliding far below, the blinding light of the afternoon sky.

Yet when he looked at Isa — her eyes wide with wonder, laughter spilling from her lips, cheeks flushed with delight — it was that which thrilled him most. Because despite everything, against all odds, he had at least managed to amaze her.

*****

Their base was a small beach house on the Atlantic coast, which, due to a wide array of protective charms, looked like a ruin to Muggles. In reality, it was a whitewashed, one-storey riad tucked between the dunes with terracotta roof tiles and faded cobalt shutters that creaked every time the ocean breeze provided some mercy in the relentless climate. It was small — completely different from what Isa was used to — but cosy. The tiled floors were cool underfoot, the small kitchen smelled of spices, the small living room was decorated with low-slung cushions and shelves lined with books and artefacts from all over the Maghreb and there was a single bedroom with a carved cedarwood bed in which they fell asleep late at night — just like they had done so

many times in their lives at Black Manor, but somehow, suddenly, felt strange and charged with something Regulus couldn't name.

The house came with a House Elf, a wiry little thing named *Asal*, who wore a fez stitched with golden thread and insisted on preparing an enormous Moroccan breakfast each morning, including msemen folded with honey and butter, khobz warm from the clay oven, amlou spread thick on bread, preserved lemon and olives, eggs with cumin, and mint tea so strong Regulus thought he'd pass out the first time he took a sip.

The rest of each day, they spent exploring the country — now that they were within Moroccan magical borders, they could Apparate freely wherever they wished.

The mornings of the first two days were spent lazily on their private stretch of beach, where Regulus — shielded by layers of cooling and sun-protection charms — tried not to die under the Moroccan sun, while Isa seemed entirely unbothered, stretched out on a towel in an alarmingly small Muggle bathing garment which she insisted was 'completely ordinary' and called a bikini.

Against Asal's vociferous protestations, they spent the afternoons and evenings wandering through a nearby coastal medina. They passed beneath stone arches and along narrow lanes that buzzed with life — playing children, shopping parents. Isa, utterly delighted, haggled her way through baskets of dates and rows of slippers dyed every colour imaginable. She laughed when the vendors tried to overcharge her — and laughed even louder when they realised she spoke not only French, but fluent Arabic as well. The dialect was different, or so Regulus had been told, but they could easily understand one another. And if few people were immune to the charm of Isadora Nott to begin with, then now that they could actually converse with her, even the most stoic of locals seemed to melt. They couldn't walk a mere fifty yards without being ambushed by local women, gathering around her, asking questions and offering compliments.

She was radiant — flushed from the heat, golden from the sun, sipping sweet mint tea and smoking shisha from a brass pipe taller than she was. Regulus watched her contentedly, letting her take the centre stage and watch how at ease she was, and how thrilled and curious and electric she was when she was so unburdened.

On the third day, they Apparated to the magical medina of Marrakesh. It was hidden behind enchantments at the far end of Jemaa el-Fnaa,

and although visiting it required them to don magical clothing — as opposed to the Muggle attire they'd worn so far — they both had to agree it was worth it.

The streets were more crowded, but the cooling charms made it bearable. Vendors hawked enchanted spices and carpets that hovered sulkily in mid-air, waiting to be bought. In a tiny café shaded by enchanted vines that bloomed in real time, they drank cinnamon coffee strong enough to set one's nerves alight, and watched a charmer coax a winged cobra into tying itself into the shape of some love rune.

They sat down at a café terrace, looking over a square below. Regulus took a slow sip of his coffee. Isa blew a stream of watermelon-mint smoke from her shisha directly into his face, laughing.

"Oh, come on," she teased. "You've got to admit this smells better than ordinary cigarettes."

Regulus snorted. "True."

A short silence fell until Isa broke it.

"So… heard much from Evan? Or Barty?"

He shrugged. "Not much. You?"

"No. Barty's the world's laziest correspondent, so I didn't bother writing him. But I did write Evan — they're always together anyway. Last I heard, they were in Italy. Sounded happy. You got to see them before they left?"

Regulus's mind, unbidden, snapped back to the last evening he saw them.

"Yes. Something like that."

Isa raised her brows. "What's with that tone?"

As scheduled, Evan and Barty — along with Avery, Mulciber, Severus and a bunch of others — had taken the Mark in the latest Inauguration Ritual. As far as Regulus knew, none of them had brought someone they truly wished dead; they'd been given random sacrifices instead. If it had been Barty's choice, Regulus was sure it would've been his own father standing on the wrong side of his wand — but well, one didn't easily get their hands on the Head of Magical

Law Enforcement.

Regulus hadn't been required to attend, which he was grateful for. Still, they'd gathered at Black Manor afterwards for a rather grim sort of celebration — Barty, Evan, Mulciber, Avery and Severus — just like old times. The boys had all got recklessly pissed in record time and Evan had spiralled into a quiet breakdown, vomiting all over the carpet in the same manner Regulus had done after his first kill.

Regulus had lured the rest into the kitchen with Whiskerly's chicken tenders, so Evan could have his breakdown in peace.

"I—I'm sorry, mate, I—"

Evan doubled over again, retching violently onto the carpet.

"It's all right, Evan," Regulus said quietly. "Just let it out."

"I don't know what's happening—" another heave. "I didn't even care about the person—"

But he had. Regulus knew. Evan did care, just like Regulus had cared.

"Still with me, Reg?"

Isa's voice pulled him back to the present. He cleared his throat. A long pause stretched between them.

"They took the Mark," he said finally.

Isa looked confused.

"Evan and Barty," he clarified. "They took it before they left for Italy."

"Oh," Isa breathed. "Well… it was bound to happen, I guess. I'm sure Barty is positively delighted."

Regulus let out a snort, unable to completely hide the darkness in it. "He is."

A silence followed in which Regulus absentmindedly stirred the mint in his tea, digging with his spoon, then letting it drop back into the tiny teacup. Isa took another drag from the water pipe before she spoke.

"How does it work?"

Regulus looked up, puzzled.

“Taking the Mark,” she clarified. “Like… I gather the way to get branded is dark. But how dark?”

Regulus exhaled deeply. “Well… however dark you’re imagining right now… and then darker.”

Isa’s expression was unreadable. There was something wry in it, but also something quiet — sad, maybe. Or afraid.

“Does it have a function, though?” she continued. “Like I get that it’s a kind of… badge of honour, and a way to set yourself apart…”

And then Regulus realised they’d never truly discussed it. The two most important men in her life — her father and her soon-to-be fiancé — both branded with the Mark, and she didn’t even know what it did. The fact it had taken a trip to the other side of the Mediterranean to ask underscored just how little they really spoke about the Revolution and about his role in it.

“It’s not just visual,” Regulus explained, watching the charcoals of the water pipe glow red as Isa inhaled. “It’s also a summoning mark. He can summon us — and we can summon Him.”

They looked at each other. Isa’s gaze was unreadable, but there was something chilling in it.

“Dark indeed,” she murmured.

They were interrupted by a street vendor approaching the table, offering lacquered snake figurines that danced when touched. They declined politely, and when he moved on, Isa spoke again.

“Are they also… doing things?”

That was a grey area. Regulus never liked sharing too much with Isa. He wasn’t supposed to, of course — but she was *Isa*, the first daughter of Magnus Nott, one of the most distinguished names in the Revolution, and soon to be engaged to Regulus himself. Her allegiance was as solid as anyone’s. Still, she’d always been a little too vocal for comfort — especially on things Regulus preferred to ignore. The role Evan and, especially, Barty might play in the movement was one he wasn’t eager to explore — not in his own mind, let alone aloud.

“Nah,” Regulus shrugged. “They’re on holiday, mostly. That’ll keep

them busy enough."

It wasn't entirely true. In the weeks before their departure, Lucius and Yaxley had taken Evan and Barty out on two nights of surveillance and even a raid. They'd been straightforward missions, without complications — but that hadn't stopped either boy from recounting every little detail with obsessive energy any time Regulus had seen them since.

Not that Regulus had seen all that much of them. Somehow, he had managed to stay in the background. He pretended to be giving the new wave of Revolutionaries space to show off their eagerness and skill, sidestepping many tasks in the process. He'd taken part in a bit of surveillance here and there, but for the most part, he'd hidden out at Black Manor or in the Muggle world during the holidays.

It did come at a cost, though — the less involved he was, the less information he had, and the more he worried about the possibility of James and Sirius being involved in the confrontations taking place during raids, surveillance, intelligence gathering or sabotage missions.

Regulus knew they were aligned with Dumbledore's camp, but what did that mean in practice? Would they be sent into the field immediately? Would they be trained?

No, the chance of running into either of them during a mission — and the catastrophic consequences that might follow — was just another reason for Regulus to stay out of the spotlight. It was also one more reason he'd chosen to spend the engagement holiday in the Muggle parts of Morocco, where no one knew who they were and no photos could possibly end up in the *Daily Prophet*. There'd be enough of those once their engagement was announced — the *Prophet* would cover it extensively.

Although he'd told himself it didn't matter, Regulus couldn't shake the nausea curling low in his stomach at the thought of James reading about it.

He'd sensed Isa's nerves from the first night — the tension in her shoulders, the way she kept talking to fill a silence that hadn't even arrived yet. She had probably assumed he'd do it straight away — over dinner, maybe, or after, before they went to bed. When that didn't happen, she likely thought it would come on the final night. It made sense, after all.

But with the engagement being so premeditated, and both knowing

what this entire trip was for, Regulus wanted to set everything on everything to surprise her, to amaze her if there was a chance. He wanted her, despite everything, to feel wonder.

So, on the fifth night — exactly halfway through their trip — he staged a serendipitous encounter. A weathered man in a deep blue djellaba crossed their path just as they left a souk, offering them a night among the dunes. Regulus acted intrigued at the invitation and was glad to see Isa's eyes light up immediately.

They travelled to the Erg Chebbi dunes near Merzouga where they raced through the sands on enchanted sleds — Isa roaring with laughter as she turned sharply to spray sand in his face, Regulus shouting mock offence as he gave chase, their voices booming and echoing off the dunes endlessly. There was no one else for miles.

Dinner was served at a Bedouin camp built from thick woven rugs and poles carved with runes. A fire crackled in the centre and the lanterns swaying gently overhead, lit the bowls of fragrant lamb tagine, couscous with raisins and cinnamon, and apricot stew ladled over steaming rice. They ate cross-legged while Isa talked animatedly with the Bedouin men, her Arabic quick and playful. They were enchanted — not just by her, but by the rare joy of being able to drop the formal French and speak their own language with a foreigner. She translated for Regulus between teasing him with the others and making the whole group burst out laughing at some running joke he didn't quite grasp.

He didn't mind. He was too nervous to properly take in what was happening anyway — too focused on what would come after dinner. His throat was dry; it had become nearly impossible to swallow any more of the delicious food they'd been offered.

Afterwards, they took their camels out into the desert, dismounting to walk side by side through the sands as stars began to pop up across the horizon. When they found a quiet rise between two dunes, Regulus spread out a thick woven plaid, and they sat. The camels settled a little way off, groaning as they folded their legs beneath them. Regulus poured tea from a thermos — the same nearly lethal mint blend from the beach house — and tried to keep his hands from shaking. He was so nervous he could feel his heart pounding in his chest and his leg twitching with energy.

This was it. This was what they'd been leading up to for weeks, for months.

He was going to do it. He was actually… *doing* it.

And she had no idea.

She was standing now, chattering on about the stars, pointing upwards — about their Astronomy classes, about how it was a shame they couldn't see the Regulus star this time of year, about the sun obscuring Leo, about how the whole constellation was muddled until summer. Then about Divination — about the intersect between signs and stars and the many things that had made them laugh back in third year, when they both took the subject.

She kept talking and pointing and laughing, completely unaware of what was going on in Regulus's mind behind her.

And then she turned.

Her voice cut off mid-sentence when she saw his face. Her eyes locked with his.

Everything stilled.

Her breath hitched. Her eyes went wide. He swallowed — hard — then, slowly, silently, dropped to one knee in the warm sand.

From the pocket of his robes, he drew the ring box that held the only ring worth giving her. The only one that could ever mean something to a girl who had access to the rawest diamonds, the purest gold, and the most exclusive gemstones.

The engagement ring of Isa's favourite woman in the entire world — her Nanna.

He drew a long, steadying breath, and then reached for her hand. Her fingers curled softly into his. Her lips parted, but no sound came.

"Isadora Elowyn Nott," he said, his voice quiet and low, "after being my best friend for as long as I can remember — setting food on fire at dinner parties when we were little, trusting me to teach you to fly when we were small, outshining me in nearly every subject at school just to irritate me, and most of all, being the most loyal, unconditional, infuriatingly brilliant best friend anyone could dream of… would you do me the honour of becoming my wife?"

She didn't answer straight away. She just stood there — her slightly watered eyes on his, lips trembling slightly. Then, slowly — almost

imperceptibly at first — she nodded. A small smile broke over her face, wide and honest and glowing.

“Yes, Reg,” she whispered. “I will.”

*****

“You know,” Isa said, wincing as she downed a fiery liquid in one go, “that the word ‘alcohol’ comes from the Arabic *al-kuhl*?”

Regulus didn’t reply — he was too busy blinking away tears as his own throat was set ablaze by the same merciless spirit.

“It used to refer to the powder — like kohl, the eyeliner — that was made through distillation,” she went on, gesturing vaguely. “They’d grind down antimony ore, heat it up, and catch the vapour. That powder was *al-kuhl*. Then the word started meaning, like, any distilled substance. And then, boom — booze.”

Regulus still didn’t answer. He was just staring at her as she poured them another round of the drink — apparently called *mahia*, a date-based spirit that had a particularly nasty kick.

“And you know what’s funny, too?” she continued, taking his glass and knocking back the contents like it was pumpkin juice. She shuddered violently. “In Latin, the word for alcohol is *spiritus* . Like… spirit. There are loads of legends here that when you drink, your spirit leaves your body temporarily.”

“And then what?” Regulus croaked, voice gravelly from the burn.

“Then jinns can hop in and borrow you for a bit. That’s why people say they do things they regret or can’t remember — because they were technically possessed.”

And honestly, Regulus thought, there may well have been something to it. Especially considering that only minutes later, they were back at the Muggle souk — which, despite the hour, was still teeming with vendors, music and several small children doing cartwheels across cobblestones.

“God,” Isa giggled, stumbling slightly before grabbing Regulus’s shoulders to steady herself. “I’m *properly* pissed.”

Regulus snorted, though he wasn’t much better himself.

She squinted, pointing dramatically at something on a stall. "*Ooooh*. That's pretty. Don't you think that's pretty? Like a tiara thing?"

"I… guess?" Regulus squinted at the sparkly item, unsure whether it was a tiara or a very confused belt.

Isa gasped. "HA. We're engaged now! You're my *fiancé*! You have to *buy* me things now."

Regulus let out a bark of laughter. "I bought you things when we weren't engaged, Isa. Do you want the tiara?"

"Do you think they'll let me wear a tiara at our wedding?"

"One thing at a time, Ies," Regulus groaned.

Isa nodded solemnly. "Alright. Wait… I have an idea." She waggled a finger at him. "You're going to buy the tiara *and* you're going to haggle."

"Oh, no," Regulus muttered.

"Come *on*, it'll be fun! Rile him up! I bet you could get seventy-five percent off the asking price."

There was that characteristic look in her eyes — that fierce determination — and Regulus knew he was doomed. He sighed.

By the time they were back on the little private beach behind their rented house, the sky was already threatening to pale with the first signs of dawn.

The drinks had mostly worn off, but a drowsiness lingered, though it might've been from the fatigue, too. Regulus, frowning, was recounting his dirhams for what had to be the fifth time.

"Seventy-five percent *more*," he muttered, thoroughly disgruntled. "I paid seventy-five percent *more* than the initial price."

A short silence followed, and then they both burst out in roaring laughter, making Regulus collapse backwards into the sand.

"But," Isa said, taking a triumphant drag from the shisha that had somehow, miraculously, ended up in their possession, "we *did* get a water pipe, too."

She flopped down beside him, head resting against his shoulder. They

lay there in easy silence as the sky grew lighter, the stars slowly vanishing.

Isa lifted her hand, turning the ring on her finger thoughtfully — it was the most beautiful shade of gold with a rose-cut diamond glinting in the last remaining starlight. “Gosh, I loved her. Nanna.”

“I know,” Regulus said quietly.

She turned her head towards him, offered a small smile, then looked back at the sky.

He felt her inhale, he felt the quiet shift in her posture — a subtle but clear bracing. Instantly, he braced himself too.

“Reg?” she asked.

“Yes?”

“How… how are we going to do it?” Her voice was quiet, fragile. “Like… physically.”

She didn’t look at him — just kept her eyes on the sky, her cheeks visibly flushed.

Regulus’s throat went dry. It was something he had thought about, of course. As husband and wife, a certain level of intimacy was expected, and it was something he could never deny her. It was bad enough that she couldn’t marry the one she’d actually wanted to marry, but to deny her love in that way… that was plain cruel. He’d been mulling it over for weeks until he’d found some sort of middle ground, at least for the time being.

“Well,” he began, gently cupping her cheek and turning her face towards him. Her eyes were visibly nervous.. “What if… we waited? Until we’re married. That way it’s something we… I don’t know… make special. Even with you know… everything else.” He swallowed, quieter now. “We’re still at school, anyway. How about that?”

Isa smiled, slow and genuine. “That sounds good, Reg.”

They lay like that for a while, watching the sky lighten with creeping orange and gold.

Then, suddenly, Regulus groaned. “Oh, fuck.”

Isa jumped slightly. “What?”

“We’ve got to leave in three hours.”

“What?” she sat up. “We haven’t even *slept*, Reg!”

“I *know*,” he groaned again. “We’re due in Fez.”

Isa flopped back into the sand dramatically. “Why didn’t we just go to bed?”

Regulus groaned. “Blame the jinns.”

*****

It had taken several cups of brutally strong Arabic coffee and a small mountain of cigarettes to get Isa even remotely functional. Regulus had braved one sip of the stuff and immediately regretted it — it churned his stomach more violently than the mahia had. Still, he was better off than Isa. The adrenaline thrumming through his veins — from knowing exactly where they were headed — was doing far more for him than caffeine or nicotine ever could.

In truth, he’d been planning this morning for weeks, ever since that remark from Mr Nott about the Bedouins.

Regulus had thrown himself into research about the desert nomads — not the romanticised nonsense favoured in travel columns, but academic studies on the desert-walkers whose magical knowledge stretched back millennia. He’d pored over their history and, more importantly, the near-systematic purging of Bedouin magical texts by successive regimes who feared what they could not control. That trail had led him straight to Fez, and more precisely, to the hidden magical wing of the Library of Al-Qarawiyyin.

Everything he’d found suggested that the library housed what was possibly the last complete collection of Bedouin arcana in North Africa — ancient tomes, scrolls and manuscripts that had somehow survived censorship. Regulus had been praying to every deity he could name that these sources would include something — anything — on soul-binding. He tried not to think about the fact that the future of the world might hinge on it. Tried not to think about the terrifying possibility that this was, quite literally, the world’s last and only hope.

The library required a special appointment for visitors. Regulus had arranged it weeks in advance, which was why they were here at nine in the morning — disgustingly hungover, miserably sleep-deprived — instead of turning up in the afternoon after a restorative nap and some

semblance of recovery.

The only truly difficult part of this plan would be convincing the sharp-minded Isa that this was just a minor recreational visit, a curious little stop with no deeper significance, and not, in fact, the keystone to taking down the Dark Lord.

But, as it turned out, *that* wasn't the hard part at all.

"Oh my God, *Reg*," Isa groaned, long and suffering, as they finally turned the corner and took in the gold plaque of the library. She was still in her sunglasses, and Regulus didn't need to see her eyes to know she was rolling them in exasperation. "*A library*?"

Regulus smiled sheepishly.

"I mean, I *like* books too, Reg," she went on, "but this…?"

"I'm sorry, Ies," he said, hands half-lifted in surrender. "I had to make an appointment for this one. It's apparently the most beautiful library in the whole Maghreb."

And, of course, the one most likely to house the kind of information Regulus was desperately looking for.

Isa sighed so deeply Regulus was sure her soul left her body briefly. "I should've known. My fiancé: the world's biggest swot."

"Yeah, yeah," Regulus muttered, trying not to smile. "But just look at that building."

They both turned fully then — and it was definitely worth the turn.

The building rose in soft, sun-washed stone and its carved archways twisted like vines. Creeping jasmine spilled over the façades, mingled with desert lilies and flowering sage. It was beautiful.

When they stepped through the heavy wooden doors, the temperature dropped at once — a welcome relief — and they were immediately accosted by two fussy House Elves in silver-threaded waistcoats, who began diligently lint-rolling Isa's dress and brushing Regulus's sleeves before either of them could speak.

Then, through a beautifully tiled archway, emerged a man who could only be the head of the library. He was tall and slender, with deeply tanned skin, a neat silver moustache, and plum-coloured robes. A

wand rested at his hip, tucked into a broad leather belt. Regulus greeted him in French, as protocol dictated. The man inclined his head politely, but offered no more than minimal warmth.

Isa stepped forward, smiled, and addressed him in fluid Arabic. The man's face lit up in surprise and delight, and immediately began speaking rapidly in Arabic. Regulus caught none of it, but watched as the man tapped Isa gently on the shoulder and gestured for them to follow.

It took the better part of forty-five minutes to get through the formalities. As Regulus later discovered, the man had insisted on offering them tea no fewer than five times. But at last — *at last* — they were let loose.

The interior of the library was a marvel. It soared upward like a minaret — seven concentric floors around a central atrium lit by an enchanted skylight that mimicked the open desert sky. Ladders floated from one shelf to another and low magical lights bobbed near reading alcoves. The air smelled of spice and parchment.

Sections were marked in Arabic, French and Old Amazigh. The first floor housed all kinds of sources on Healing, the second on Magical Cartography, the third on Wandlore and Craftmanship.

Isa had made a beeline for Healing on the first floor. Regulus climbed past her, quickly scanning the directory. He passed Magical History, Elemental Magicks and a section ominously titled Les Arts Obscurs.

Then he saw it. A single black plaque, written in sleek silver script. *Soulwork*.

His heart skipped. He nearly ran to the door, but then remembered to compose himself.

The door didn't open.

He tried again. He pulled and pushed. He even whispered a few spells, although he knew perfectly well they wouldn't work. And indeed — nothing.

And then, with a soft *pop*, the same two House Elves appeared beside him once more.

"That section is restricted, sir," said one, bowing apologetically. "Access by Ministry clearance only."

Regulus felt his stomach sink.

“How do I get that?” he asked, though he already knew the answer.

“Through the Ministry of Magic, Department of Ancient Magic,” the Elf said cheerfully. “Rabat branch.”

Which meant paperwork, vetting… Weeks of waiting, possibly months. And, more importantly, his request would be registered somewhere. It would be traceable.

He swore under his breath. There was simply no way.

He stood there, stunned. All these weeks of planning, all the research. This entire trip — the dates, the excuse of the engagement — had been because of this. The soulwork section. The answer he needed. And now it was all out of reach.

He descended the stairs slowly, lead in his shoes, disappointment spreading over him. The Plan had barely started and he was already failing the mission.

He found Isa back on the third floor, again chatting animatedly in Arabic with the head of the library, now seated beside her at a table.

Then something clicked — and an utterly mad, impossible idea struck him.

Regulus crossed the room swiftly. The head of the library gave him a polite but noticeably less enthusiastic nod this time, and after a few courteous words, excused himself down the corridor.

Isa turned to Regulus with a smile, still sipping her now-lukewarm tea. “He’s so friendly, honestly. See? Language matters. It makes people more… accessible. The moment you speak theirs, it’s like something opens.”

Regulus nodded, a smile tugging at his mouth. “I have an idea.”

Isa’s eyes narrowed with immediate interest. She caught the subtle shift in his tone — mischievous, almost gleeful — and raised an eyebrow. Regulus, after all, didn’t often sound like that.

“Oh?” she asked. “Do tell.”

Regulus leaned in. “A whole night of foot massages and letting you smoke that ridiculous waterpipe in the bedroom says you can’t get

that man to grant us access to the restricted section."

Isa's lips curled in a wicked smile. "You sound awfully sure of yourself."

Regulus gave a casual shrug.

"But I'm more sure," she shot back, eyes sparkling.

Regulus snorted.

"And three nights of foot massages," she added sweetly.

He rolled his eyes and slouched into the nearest chair. Isa looked delighted — the way she always did when presented with a challenge she fully intended to win.

And well — win she did.

Barely thirty minutes later, Regulus nearly jumped out of his skin when Isa popped up beside him and whispered a triumphant "*HA HA*" directly into his ear.

"That's *three* nights of rubbing feet, Regulus, and *you* don't get to complain about the waterpipe in the bedroom!"

Regulus groaned loudly, but none of it truly registered.

His heart was hammering.

She'd done it.

Isa had done it.

The relief was so immense he thought he might scream. But he held it in — because Isa couldn't know. She couldn't know what this meant, what she'd just pulled off without even realising it. If she knew what was at stake…

"Well then, dear fiancée," he said lightly, offering her his arm, "shall we?"

"Lead the way," Isa said smugly.

And so they did.

They spent the rest of the day on the seventh floor, utterly absorbed.

The library's head had, thankfully, become preoccupied entertaining a group of visiting officials on the fourth floor, which meant Isa and Regulus had the restricted section to themselves.

Regulus's hands were clammy, sweat slicking his palms, and he had the irrational fear that the moisture might somehow ruin the ancient bindings or dissolve the ink on the page, but he quickly pushed the thought aside.

He moved from shelf to shelf, feigning casualness, murmuring things like, "Oh, look at this one," and "Fascinating, isn't it?" — hoping to look like he was just aimlessly browsing and not, in fact, frantically searching for something specific.

He thought he was doing a decent job — right up until he let out an embarrassingly high-pitched yelp.

Isa glanced up sharply. Regulus cleared his throat and clutched his foot, faking a limp. "Stubbed my toe," he offered with a pained grin.

She rolled her eyes.

But he was already turning to the book in his hands. His fingers trembled slightly as he opened it. There it was — tucked into a chapter, its heading written in spidery script.

"Horcruxes: The Splintered Soul and Its Undoing."

At last.

Chapter End Notes

> OMG so it happened. Morocco and the engagement happened and the Plan is still planning! There's a few quick thoughts I wanted to share:
>
> First of all, this chapter is a bit of an ode to the Maghreb (and I guess the MENA region more broadly). I would've done it more justice by including Darija and French in it too, but I always find it very confusing when a lot of dialogue is in a different language. I don't like putting translations in the end (because scrolling back and forth can really pull you out of the story) and putting them directly in the text can feel chaotic. So this will do!
>
> Now, I want to acknowledge something important: if you're familiar with the term Orientalism, you'll know it refers (very

briefly) to the Western tradition of depicting 'the East' — including North Africa, the Middle East and Asia — through a lens that often exoticises, romanticises or distorts these cultures. It's not always outright negative; sometimes it comes across through idealised images — like mosaic tiles, desert palaces and 1001 Nights vibes; i.e. that kind of dreamy, 'otherworldly' aesthetic. I'm very aware that I gave a romanticised portrayal of Morocco in this chapter, and I want to be transparent about that. It's not meant to stereotype or condescend. In fact, it's part of a broader stylistic pattern in this story — the Blacks have their grand, gothic estates, Isa's estate in Damascus is full of domes and arches etc. It's really more about creating this atmosphere across different regions, NOT about flattening real cultures into one-dimensional aesthetics.

Also, a very special SO to al-Qarawiyyin — located in Fez, Morocco, it's often cited as the oldest existing university in the world, founded in 859 by a woman, Fatima al-Fihri. And isn't that just brilliant? It completely challenges the widespread orientalist narrative that this region is and has always been barbaric, illiterate, or inherently oppressive to women. It's a reminder that the history of education, scholarship and female agency in the MENA region is rich and deep, and often erased or completely overlooked in Western accounts. Alright. THANKS for coming to my TED talk.

(also not me throwing in a random arabic language fact whenever i see the chance bye)

Then...

AHHH!!! They're engaged. In the desert under a sky full of stars no less!! Reg's always been too romantic for his own good, that's for sure. And no matter how much i love Isa, GOD i miss jegulus. But we'll get there eventually, honestly ;)

Chapter 4: Of Magazines & Revelations

Chapter Notes

Oh, you have all spoiled me so much with comments, you absolute legends! I am so excited and grateful for all the engagement you're offering! Thank you SO much.

I had much fun writing this chapter, I hope you enjoy reading it too!

P.S.: small but still existing chance that I won't be able to post next chapter on time due to travels. I'm doing my best but just know I'm not dying somewhere in the ditch if I don't!

P.S.S.: you guys are brilliant. really!

Fresh Out: Dream Couple Isadora & Regulus To Say YES

Move over, Lucius and Narcissa — the wizarding world has a new golden couple, and they've just made it more official than ever!

Of course, whispers of the romance between Regulus Black and Isadora Nott have been swirling for years. Schoolmates recall them as inseparable — always together in classes, at meals, even during those long, chilly Hogsmeade weekends. The photographs from the last few Annual Christmas Balls at Dreadmoor Keep only fuelled the fire — and who could forget them arriving together at Narcissa and Lucius's wedding, hand in hand for both the ceremony and the rehearsal? But now, it's been taken to an entirely new level: it's finally confirmed — Regulus Arcturus Black, heir to the House of Black, is engaged to Isadora Elowyn Nott, society's reigning beauty and daughter of the formidable Magnus Alaric Nott.

That's right — the childhood sweethearts are tying the knot!

According to a particularly well-placed source, the proposal took place in the middle of the Moroccan desert, beneath a sky "so clear, you'd swear it was enchanted." The evening reportedly featured floating lanterns, a Veela-hair string quartet and hours of stargazing on enchanted carpets. One insider confided, "He got down on one knee in the sand. She was barefoot.

It was one of those moments that makes you believe in fairytales again."

And in times like these, such moments are more than just glamorous — they're necessary. As darkness creeps steadily across the continent, this announcement has offered a rare glimmer of joy. "It feels like something worth holding on to," one source at the Ministry remarked. "Like a promise that the future can still be beautiful."

And speaking of beautiful — the Morocco trip was, by all accounts, more than just a picturesque getaway. "It was candlelit dinners and private excursions every night," an insider revealed, "and their hotel suite had quite the view. Ornately carved ceilings, a velvet-draped bed... all very tasteful."

Though we've been reliably informed that something kept Regulus the Radiant and his soon-to-be bride from leaving the room for nearly two full days.

So, what's next for society's most-watched couple?

Speculation is rife. Will it be a private oasis in the Sahara? A moonlit ceremony amid the ruins of Carthage? Or that elusive floating garden off the Dalmatian Coast, where rumour has it peacocks deliver the rings? As for fashion, word is Isadora has already spoken to a French couturier known for working with enchanted fabrics — some rumoured to have been dyed in phoenix tears.

As always, we'll be first to report.

For a full retrospective on how Isa and Regulus went from elegant nods at debutante balls to undeniable heat, turn to Page 5: "The Black & The Beauty."

For our exclusive scoop on what she might wear — plus a behind-the-scenes look at her designer shortlist — flip to Page 7: "Dressing Isadora: The Gown, The Glamour, The Gold."

"Oh, just *fuck off* already, Crouch," Regulus snapped, snatching the glossy magazine from Barty's hands and lobbing it toward the bin. It was a spectacularly poor throw — the thing landed with a damp *flatch* on the kitchen floor. There evidently was a reason he was a Seeker and not a Chaser.

Evan snorted. Barty, naturally, howled with laughter.

"Oh, I'd forgotten all about *Regulus the Radiant*," Evan grinned into his

coffee.

Barty leaned back with theatrical flair, fingers steepled. “No one forgets the *Black Charm*, darling.”

Their laughter was cut short by the creak of the kitchen door — and the sudden arrival of Isa herself.

She stood in the doorway, her sun-kissed skin glowing against the backdrop of the drab English morning. Regulus couldn’t quite explain it, but even in a plain white dress, her hair tumbling in disarray over her shoulders, there was something effortlessly ethereal about her.

“Ah,” Barty said, a slow grin stretching across his face. “Nott. Didn’t expect you here.”

Isa breezed in, ruffling Evan and Barty’s hair as she passed. “Heading to Damascus later. Postponed my Portkey for the night.”

She slid into the chair opposite Regulus. Without a word, he poured her a mug of coffee and slid it across.

“What were you sniggering about, then?” she asked lightly, arching an eyebrow.

Regulus groaned. “Nothing—”

Naturally, Barty summoned the magazine from the floor with a flick of his wand and dropped it onto the table with an infuriating flourish.

Isa scanned the article, groaned louder than Regulus had, and tossed the magazine into the bin — with far better aim, he noted bitterly.

“Absolute fucking bollocks,” she muttered, brushing golden strands behind her ear.

The gesture caught Barty’s attention. He seized her hand with absurd drama. “Ooh, absolutely *ravishing*, Nott,” he drawled, stroking the ring on her finger. “Or should I call you *Mrs Black* already?”

She swatted him, laughing, though Regulus didn’t miss the flicker of unease behind it. He knew exactly what she was thinking — she wasn’t taking his name. And he was sure that when *Witch Weekly* found out, it would spark something bordering on orgasmic pleasure in their editorial offices.

“So,” she said, smoothly changing the subject, “how was Italy?”

Barty stretched just a little too slowly, twisting his arm so that the Dark Mark peeked out beneath his sleeve in such a way that it wouldn't have gone unnoticed by even the Selwyn twins. Regulus saw Isa tense, though her expression remained composed. He was nearly certain Barty was disappointed not to get a reaction.

"It was good," Evan said quickly, breaking the silence.

"Yeah," Barty added breezily. "What's not to love? Pizza, wine… and plenty of birds."

Isa lifted a brow. "Funny. I've had letters from Melania and Amaryllis. Said you four were inseparable."

Barty smirked. "Well, Greengrass was one of the girls I pulled, of course."

Regulus rolled his eyes. Isa snorted. "You're insufferable. I honestly don't know how Italy survived you."

"Oi," Barty said. "How about Rosier and Ackworth, then?"

Regulus caught the faint blush rising in Evan's cheeks — the tension in his shoulders — but couldn't quite place why. Isa seemed to notice something too, as she glanced between all of them with a contemplative expression.

"Can't help it if the rest of you are prudes," Barty went on, grinning. "'Not leaving the room for two days' — does *Witch Weekly* know you were just reading the whole time?"

Against his will, Regulus let out a barking laugh. Evan joined him.

Isa rolled her eyes, clearly trying not to smile. "Oh, you've no idea what Reg and I have been up to, Crouch," she said smoothly, sipping her coffee.

Regulus felt his stomach twist. He tensed and could already feel it happening — feel that Isa was taking the bait. Normally, he had little patience for her spinning tales about a fictional sex life just to wind Barty up, but he'd grit his teeth through it. Today, however, things took a sharp and immediate turn for the worse with the arrival of two figures striding in from the Entrance Hall — Lucius and Yaxley — whose presence Isa hadn't noticed, sitting with her back to the door.

She turned to Barty with a serene smile, utterly unbothered. "Don't

trouble yourself over my fiancé's and my sex life, Bartemius darling."

"Ies—" Regulus tried, but Isa pressed on, voice eerily sancherine and sharp as a blade.

"I promise you, Reg keeps me *more* than entertained. All night, in fact — repeatedly." She let that linger just long enough. "It's a bit more involved than your quick little fumbles with drunk Italian girls behind vineyard sheds, I imagine."

Barty, to no one's surprise, utterly delighted by the exchange, smirked broadly. Evan sniggered into his coffee.

Regulus, meanwhile, was desperately hoping Isa would shut up before she took the lie any further — especially as Yaxley's smug expression made it obvious both he and Lucius had very much clocked what sort of conversation they'd walked into.

Unfortunately, Isa wasn't quite finished yet.

"You ought to take notes, Barty. Who knows — with a bit of guidance, you might even manage to get one of your birds off for once."

Barty, seated beside Regulus and fully aware of their audience, leaned back with glee and folded his hands behind his head. "Oh, *please* do tell, Nott."

Regulus kicked him under the table, earning a strangled sound that was half laugh, half groan.

"Ies, *shut up*," Regulus hissed, flicking his eyes towards the doorway.

Isa turned — and froze.

Lucius was lounging against the wall near the door, visibly entertained, and threw Regulus a knowing wink. Yaxley leaned in the doorway, smirking at Isa. She winced — and although she did her best to hold composure, the flush blooming in her cheeks betrayed her.

Yaxley's gaze slid over her like oil — slow, heavy and amused. There was a clear challenge in it.

"Yes," he drawled, stepping further into the room, "do tell, dear Isadora."

Barty chuckled, biting his knuckle with glee. Evan grinned into his mug.

Isa managed to compose herself and stood slowly. She didn't flinch, didn't stumble as she lifted her chin with queenly calm. She crossed one leg over the other, smoothing the skirt of her dress before giving Yaxley a look so regal it could have frozen the pond in the Manor's garden.

"Oh, no," she said lightly, voice honeyed but sharp. "I wouldn't want to corrupt *you* , Corban."

It got her the reaction she was clearly angling for: Lucius barked a laugh, Evan let out a low whistle and Barty gave a theatrical howl.

Regulus, for his part, only managed a groan as he scrubbed a hand over his face. Then he stood abruptly.

"Right, I'm walking you out," he said, grabbing Isa by the arm and tugging her along.

"Oh, don't leave on our account," Lucius said. "We'll only be a few minutes."

"Yes," Yaxley added silkily. "So you can get back to your... daily business."

His eyes flicked pointedly between Isa and Regulus.

Regulus felt himself stiffen but didn't rise to it. Isa shot Yaxley a glare that might've been fiercer if she hadn't gone that pink in the face.

"I was leaving anyway," she said stiffly.

Yaxley's smile turned sly. "Bit of a shame, that. You didn't finish your story, Isadora. Something about Regulus showing you the entire desert, wasn't it?"

The laughter followed them out of the kitchen.

It wasn't until they reached the fireplaces in the hall that Regulus finally looked at her. Isa offered an apologetic smile which he answered with a tired roll of his eyes.

"Off you go, Ies," he sighed.

"I'll be back in Manchester in a week," she said lightly. "You've received my parents' invitation for dinner, haven't you?"

Regulus nodded, satisfied that she hadn't clocked that it was very

much him who had set up dinner with her parents and not the other way around.

Once Isa had vanished through the green flames, Regulus made his way back to the kitchen — where, somehow, Barty had ended up in a headlock, roaring revenge while Yaxley laughed without restraint.

“Wow,” Regulus said dryly. “That escalated quickly.”

Not that it should have surprised him, really — the combination of Barty and Yaxley always seemed to end up like this.

“I think that’s a record,” Evan remarked, watching fondly.

Lucius was smiling faintly. Yaxley still had Barty locked in place as the latter thrashed around, trying to wriggle free.

With an almost bored flick of his wand, Lucius broke them apart.

“Better luck next time, lad,” Yaxley said, winking at Barty.

Regulus folded his arms. “So… what are you actually doing here?”

“There’s a task?” Barty asked, eyes lighting up.

Dread pooled in Regulus’s stomach.

Lucius chuckled. “No, Barty. Nothing like that. We just came to invite you all for drinks tonight at The Serpent.”

Regulus couldn’t help the wave of relief that hit him.

He had heard several stories from Barty about nights drinking in the bar — all when Regulus was in Morocco or pretended to be otherwise occupied — and they had painted a rather vivid picture of what to expect with tens of young Revolutionaries in the middle of war, too much firewhisky and absolutely no restraint.

Yet, it was better than a mission.

“What time?” Evan asked.

“Eight,” Lucius said.

Regulus nodded. “We’ll be there.”

*****

The Silver Serpent was a grim little bar tucked just off Knockturn Alley, not far from Borgin and Burkes. It was the kind of place that had always been utterly forgettable — which had never drawn a crowd, nor had ever seemed to want one.

This had changed a few months ago when the Revolutionaries found it. Somehow, the Silver Serpent became something of a default venue where people could meet outside of meetings and without inviting fellow Revolutionaries into the privacy of their own homes. As the war escalated and the Revolution's numbers grew, that distinction became increasingly valuable. It was also the sort of place where one could blow off steam after a tricky mission or a nasty duel. Bruised or bloodied, it didn't matter — it had become something of a tradition that, as long as you could still walk, you downed a drink at the Serpent.

Regulus hadn't done much for the Revolution over the summer. A few evenings of surveillance with Rodolphus and Yaxley, two meetings with a smaller inner circle — nothing more. Where Evan and Barty had leapt at every opportunity for raids or missions when they weren't in Italy, Regulus had stayed on the sidelines.

He suspected that Cissy had a hand in that. Over the past few months, she'd frequently said that she wished he'd had more of a childhood before the war pulled him in, that she regretted the movement hadn't been large enough in the early days to spare boys like him. And it seemed that now, as the movement *had* grown, and there *were* other options, she pulled many strings to keep Regulus out whenever possible. She knew, after all, that Hohenhain and the Dementor attack had taken their toll on him.

And yet, even though he realised he'd been spared so much, he would have much preferred to stay home. He hadn't had an evening to himself in over two weeks, and while he hadn't minded Isa's company, he'd started to long for silence, for space to sit with his thoughts. He hadn't yet fully processed the fact that he was officially engaged to her, nor the information he'd gathered on their engagement trip. Besides, they'd be off to Hogwarts in just over a week, so he needed to make use of his freedom as long as it lasted.

Not that there was much he could do. His appointment with Valaine was already scheduled — on the last day before boarding the Hogwarts Express. He'd also scoured every relevant book he could find in both the Black Manor and Grimmauld Place libraries, and he knew he wouldn't make real progress until the dinner at the Notts'

estate.

Besides, he didn't really know what to expect from a night drinking with his fellow Revolutionaries. He'd always felt like the odd one out in the Revolution because of his age. He'd always been the little boy among the important men. Even the youngest among them had at least been of age when they were recruited.

There had always been a difference. He had just recently come to realise that their difference didn't come from a gap in age, but just from a different outlook on life. Now that he was technically a man himself, he realised that he still couldn't stand the way they spoke about women, or drank until they couldn't stand, or their self-important bragging about business as though that were the only measure of a man. Yet, at least their ideological views had aligned.

But now Regulus had had his Awakening.

And he was, yet again, the odd one out. The outsider, the strange one. Not having been involved too much this summer only added to that sense of detachment. And he knew he had to fix that, knew that he couldn't risk mucking it up now. Besides, he needed information. And for that, he had to stay close to the Revolution and its leader.

But it was a precarious balance: staying close enough to gather intel, not so close that his conscience couldn't bear it. Always trying to learn more, while dreading what he might find.

And it was that fragile balance that he was sharply reminded of that evening in the bar.

The place was dim and worn, with battered tables scattered with half-played magical games. A dartboard hung crookedly on one wall, its enchanted darts hovering mid-air, waiting for someone to aim. Regulus wasn't entirely sure a woman had ever stepped foot inside — and if one had, she certainly hadn't returned.

Regulus was late. When he finally stepped through the crooked doorway, the bar was already half-full — and practically everyone had beaten him to it. Severus was deep in conversation with Rabastan in a far corner, their heads tilted together. Barty, of course, was being loud — shouting something at Yaxley across the room, both of them laughing too hard and clearly several drinks in already. A few unfamiliar faces — likely Rodolphus's colleagues — were seated around a low table, playing poker with a pile of sickles and galleons stacked between them. Lucius stood near the bar, glass raised mid-

toast, flanked by Avery, Mulciber and Evan.

A shout tore through the room, snapping Regulus from his thoughts.

“Aaah — our freshly betrothed Regulus the Radiant!” Yaxley roared from across the bar, grinning like a wolf.

Heads turned and a few people laughed.

Regulus gave him a tight, reluctant smile and kept walking, heading straight for where Lucius and Evan were gathered near the bar.

“What are you having, Regulus?” Lucius asked pleasantly.

“Firewhisky’s fine,” Regulus replied.

Lucius gave a nod to the dodgy barman — a wiry man with hollow cheeks, yellowish skin, and a wheezing sort of breath that made Regulus want to neurotically clean his glass — who slid the drink over with a lazy flick of his wand.

“So, how was Morocco then?” Lucius asked.

Regulus gave a mild nod. “It was good.”

Evan, who had already seen Regulus that morning, cast him a long, contemplative look. He knew, after all, that the engagement between Regulus and Isa hadn’t exactly been born of romance.

Not especially eager to dive into the details of his trip, Regulus turned to Avery and Mulciber instead. “What did you lot do over the holidays?”

A long conversation followed. Apparently, neither of them had had much of a holiday at all — they’d both started work at one of the trade departments at the Ministry, and had spent most of their spare time either running tasks for the Dark Lord or drinking at the Serpent.

It didn’t take long for the conversation to veer into those tasks. Technically, they weren’t supposed to talk about them — let alone in public — but the bar was filled entirely with Revolutionaries, and most were already a few drinks too deep to care. Besides, Lucius had since drifted off, and with him had gone the only real restraint anyone might’ve felt about following that particular rule.

Barty had made his way back to his closest friends by now, and the four of them leant against the bar, watching as Lucius and Yaxley

dared each other to take a shot at the dartboard. A few increasingly reckless throws later, Yaxley shouted for Rabastan to join them. Rabastan vaulted over the side of a bench and jogged over. Regulus didn't miss the reluctance in his posture.

"Oh, he's clearly recovered," Mulciber muttered dryly.

"Clearly," Evan echoed.

Regulus arched an eyebrow. "Recovered? From what?"

Avery shrugged. "Caught a few nasty jinxes the other day — at a raid."

Regulus straightened slightly. "What happened?"

"Nothing too serious," Mulciber said, though his tone didn't quite match the words. "Just a lot of blood. He looked positively horrific when he showed up here for a drink that night."

Barty scoffed. "Serves him right. Flunked it, didn't he?"

Regulus frowned. "Flunked it?"

"No one knows the details," Evan cut im. "But I heard whispers that it was Rabastan's fault the raid went sideways."

"Wouldn't be the first time he cocked something up," Barty muttered into his drink.

Avery — perhaps sensing the direction things were heading — tried to lighten the tone slightly. "Well, the raid wasn't completely botched, was it? At least two of them ended up in St Mungo's. Rabastan hit them with something nasty — some curse they can't heal until they know what it is."

Regulus felt his stomach drop instantly.

He tried to keep his voice even. "Who… who were they?"

Barty shrugged. "Dunno. Just heard they were sort of fresh out of Hogwarts."

The blood drained from Regulus's face. He forced himself to stay perfectly still. Every nerve in his body screamed: *Not James. Not Sirius.*

Avery leaned in slightly. "I overheard they're two who are always

together. Inseparable."

Regulus felt a chill run down his spine. His heart had dropped to the floor, dread curling in his gut like smoke.

Fresh out of Hogwarts. Inseparable.

Sirius. James.

He desperately tried to hide the smallness in his voice. "We don't know who they are?"

Thankfully, no one seemed to clock the panic threading through his words.

He scrambled for a way — in the fog of his rising dread — to press for more information without drawing attention. He had to know. *Had* to. Because if his suspicion was right—

He'd dreaded this from the first day they'd left Hogwarts for the holidays. The first day Sirius and James would no longer be sheltered by the castle's walls. He didn't know what joining Dumbledore truly entailed, but surely they didn't have the numbers to spare students fresh out of Hogwarts…

So that could only mean…

In a strange twist of fate, it was Barty who came to his rescue.

"Oi, Rodolphus!" he shouted toward the bar, where Lestrange was ordering another drink. "Who was it that got themselves sent to St Mungo's, then?"

Rodolphus turned, already half-pissed and clearly delighted by the attention. He always liked being the one who knew things. Slinging an arm around Barty's shoulders, he wore a gleeful grin.

"Now, Crouch, we're *not* meant to talk shop tonight," he said with mock severity. "It's our night off, you needy little bastard."

Barty grinned. "Ah, can't help wanting to celebrate, Lestrange."

Rodolphus barked a laugh. "It was that couple from Hogwarts — you know, the Gryffindor Head Boy and his little whore."

A brief silence followed.

Regulus could barely process the rest — the world stopped at *Head Boy*. Neither James nor Sirius had worn that badge.

Relief crashed over him so swiftly he nearly sagged against the bar.

“Longbottom?” Evan asked.

“Yes, that’s the one,” Rodolphus confirmed with a smirk.

Regulus remembered them — Frank Longbottom and Alice Fortescue. He remembered the way they’d duelled at the Duel Gauntlet for the ASS-program.

“Aurors-in-training now, apparently,” Rodolphus added with a mocking lilt.

“Well,” Mulciber said, smirking into his drink, “we taught them a lesson, didn’t we?”

Laughter rippled through the group. Rodolphus held up his glass and roared, “To lessons!”

“To lessons!” the others echoed, clinking glasses with glee.

Regulus raised his own drink, forced a smile and joined the toast — albeit with a tightness in his chest he couldn’t quite shake. And while he lifted his glass, pretending to find it all vaguely amusing, masking the sheer, shuddering relief that it hadn’t been James — hadn’t been Sirius — he couldn’t stop the thought pressing at the back of his mind.

It wasn’t them this time — but next time, it very well might be.

*****

“Ready to impress the in-laws, Black?”

Regulus turned just as Barty strode into his bedroom, Evan trailing behind. They caught him mid-pose in front of the mirror, smoothing a hand over his collar.

“Not bad at all, mate,” Evan said with an approving nod.

Regulus sighed, realising it was far too late to pretend he hadn’t been checking himself out. He gave his reflection one last glance before stepping back.

He was wearing a set of neatly tailored, deep green robes with silver

detailing for dinner with the Notts at their estate in Manchester. The occasion was formal enough to warrant something that commanded respect — and called for bringing a gift along — but not so grand as to require full dress robes.

Barty gave a low whistle. “Mr Nott as a father-in-law. Luckiest sod alive.”

Regulus arched an eyebrow.

Evan blinked. “Now why would you want *that*?”

Barty shrugged with a grin. “Come off it — he’s a bloody legend. One of the first to join the Revolution. Hard as nails, isn’t he?”

Regulus didn’t bother pointing out that *he* had also been one of the first to join.

“He’s a bit terrifying, if you ask me,” Evan offered. “I’d piss myself just looking at his daughter.”

Regulus snorted, earning a dismissive wave from Barty.

“You two are so dramatic,” Barty scoffed. “He’s not that bad.”

Regulus and Evan exchanged a look making it abundantly clear that both of them were reminded of the fact that Barty hadn’t grown up in the same circles. Clearly, Barty had no real grasp of what Mr Nott was capable of.

Regulus sighed and collected the gifts he’d placed neatly on his desk.

“You two staying here?” he asked, casting a glance over his shoulder.

Evan gave a nod. “If that’s alright with you.”

“Of course,” Regulus replied. “See you tonight, then.”

Barty flashed him a grin. “Have fun.”

Regulus shot Evan a last pointed look before he left the room.

*****

In theory, Regulus ought to have felt perfectly at ease around Isa’s family. He’d known them his entire life. They moved in the same circles, attended the same galas and dinners and other events. He’d

even been there when Isa had paraded her baby sisters around like miniature dolls, not a week out of the womb. Besides that, he'd built a rather solid relationship with Mr Nott. They'd been among the earliest recruits to the Revolution, branded with the Mark together, had had each other's backs in missions, had killed together. Bonded in blood — quite literally.

And yet — in practice — dinner at the Nott estate always left Regulus feeling mildly flayed open. There was something about the Notts' dining room which made his nerves itch. He always felt… exposed, laid bare beneath the chandelier light and Mrs Nott's sharp-eyed scrutiny.

They knew him too well. They knew about his past and the governor. They'd seen him as a bony, awkward child trailing in the shadow of his older, much more charismatic brother. And despite everything Regulus had done, everything he had become, he couldn't quite shake the feeling that Mrs Nott would've preferred Isa marry Sirius instead.

Of course, now that Sirius was officially a disgrace, Regulus was the obvious second-best. But everyone knew Sirius had always got on infuriatingly well with the Notts. He'd had that irritating charm, that dashing grin and unflappable charisma.

Regulus spent most of the evening trying to shove that particular thought somewhere deep, deep down. He had coaxed the Notts into this dinner for a reason, and he would not let thoughts of Sirius — or Mrs Nott's soft spot for him — derail his plan.

The dining table was as long and polished as ever, dressed in deep emerald linens with silver cutlery and crystal goblets. Isa's younger sisters, Elara and Ariadna, sat opposite him. They were starting to look more like carbon copies of Isa by the day — wavy golden hair, deep brown eyes and those same sharp cheekbones.

Elara beamed at him.

"You're my family now!"

Regulus chuckled politely. "Well — technically not yet. We're not married quite yet."

Elara frowned, brow furrowed in serious contemplation, but before she could follow that train of thought, Mrs Nott interjected brightly.

"Isa was so thrilled about Morocco. It was all so thoughtful, Regulus

— and the proposal, she said, was just beautiful. Such a shame no one snapped a photo of the moment itself…"

Regulus tried to wash down the discomfort with his side soup. He pointedly did not look at Isa, who was clearly avoiding his eyes too — her stiff posture beside him confirming she was just as uncomfortable as he was.

Unfortunately, it got worse.

Mrs Nott had only just launched into a story about Mr Nott whisking her off to Tunisia shortly after their wedding when Elara suddenly sat up, struck by a long-percolating thought. She set down her spoon with a little clink.

"I don't get it."

Mr Nott glanced over. "What is it, Elara?"

She shifted in her seat, entirely serious. "Well… when you get married, you make babies, right?"

Regulus's heart rate shot up like a hex had hit him. Isa froze beside him, mid-sip of her wine.

What?

Mrs Nott let out a tight, breathy laugh. "Er — well, I don't know if this is quite—"

"But you're *not* married yet," Elara added, still frowning. "So why are all those magazines saying you're making babies?"

In hindsight, Regulus would admit that there had been better moments to take a large spoonful of soup.

The words had barely landed before he inhaled entirely the wrong way, scalding broth burning his throat as he choked violently, his face turning the colour of a Gryffindor banner.

Isa, now as red as a tomato, smacked him on the back with frankly far more force than the situation called for.

"Elara," Mrs Nott said, voice sharp with panic, "what magazines are you talking about? What have you been *reading*?"

Regulus, desperately trying *not* to look at Mr Nott — who had gone

entirely still beside his wineglass — caught instead the wide-eyed, guilty glance Ariadna shot across the table. Isa caught it too.

"You," Isa said slowly. "*You've* been nicking Mum's *Witch Weekly,* her *Gilded Glamour… The Prophet's* gossip inserts."

Ariadna tried to look indignant, but she quickly caved under pressure. "I can't help it if they're all saying Regulus is *'warming the sheets as much as the seat at the Nott family table'*."

Regulus had only just stopped coughing when the words hit. He promptly choked again — this time on the water supposed to cool his burnt mouth — eyes streaming, mouth aflame.

Isa looked at him with so much annoyance Regulus was sure she might throttle him on the spot.

"Oh, for the love of *Merlin* —"

"What does *'warming the sheets'* mean?" Elara asked brightly, eyes wide with innocent curiosity.

Regulus let out a third coughing fit, this one violent enough to knock his chair back an inch. Mr Nott's expression had descended into something between exasperation and deep, reluctant pity.

"You might want to take a moment in the loo, lad," he said — or rather, strongly suggested — as Regulus wheezed in reply.

Regulus had never risen from a chair faster in his life.

*****

Luckily, with the utter discomfort still fresh in everyone's bones, they all sped through the torturous dinner — and before Regulus knew it, Sable the House Elf had cleared the table.

Now, although Regulus considered the entire incident of discussing him sleeping with Isa while seated next to her father — who, at that moment, happened to be holding a very sharp meat knife — deeply, *deeply*, unfortunate, the presence of Isa's younger sisters did come with one distinct advantage.

Alongside the lilies he'd brought for Mrs Nott, the expensive bottle for Mr Nott, a delicate silver bracelet for Isa and an exclusive bottle of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Regulus had also turned up with what could

only be described as a haul of sweets. Sugar quills, chocoballs, exploding bonbons, Turkish honey sticks, anything remotely colourful and cavity-inducing — he'd stuffed the entire collection into a charmed hamper.

Elara had clocked the loot the moment Regulus stepped out of the fireplace, and he had made her a simple offer on the spot: she could have *all* of it — and not a word to Mr and Mrs Nott — if she made sure that she and her sister laid claim to the drawing room straight after dinner.

It had been, in his rather unbiased opinion, an entirely reasonable trade. And if the girls had the drawing room, then the most logical place for him and Mr Nott to retire to would be the library.

And that was exactly the room Regulus needed.

"Magnus," Regulus said lightly, as Sable vanished the final dessert spoon with a snap of her fingers.

Mr Nott looked over. "Regulus."

"I wondered if I might borrow you for a moment. There's a matter I'd like to discuss — privately."

Regulus didn't miss the sharp flicker of a glance between Mr and Mrs Nott. He couldn't really blame them — the last time he'd asked for a private word, he'd announced that Isa wasn't planning to take the Black name.

After a moment, Mr Nott gave a quiet grunt and nodded.

"Well, seeing as the girls have claimed the drawing room," he said, pushing back his chair, "perhaps the library, then?"

Perfect.

Regulus suppressed the jolt of satisfaction. He offered a polite nod in reply, then followed Mr Nott out of the dining room, acutely aware of Isa's gaze burning holes between his shoulder blades the entire way.

Once inside, Mr Nott went to the drinks trolley at once. "Whisky?"

"Please," said Regulus.

With a flick of Mr Nott's wand, two glasses were poured. Both man sat down.

“Not been on a raid this week, then?” Mr Nott asked, leaning back, his eyes raking over Regulus which made him rather uncomfortable.

Regulus shook his head. “No. I was supposed to go Wednesday, but Rabastan and Barty begged me to let them take it.”

Mr Nott snorted. “Doesn’t surprise me. Crouch Jr.’s a bloody lunatic and Rabastan’s still overcompensating since he botched that raid near Leeds.”

Regulus shrugged, echoing what Mulciber had said in the Silver Serpent just days before. “Well, at least he got two of them into St Mungo’s this time, didn’t he?”

Mr Nott gave a shrug before he took a slow sip of his whisky.

“Got them good, too. Nasty curse, that. A recursive shatter-hex — difficult to crack, unless you know exactly what was cast. But it’s almost impossible to trace, so they won’t know.”

Regulus nodded and took a sip of his own. The silence stretched for a while until Mr Nott broke it.

“So. What did you want to discuss?”

Regulus exhaled through his nose. He did a quick prayer that it’d go the way he desperately needed it to go.

“I’m going to build Isa a house.”

Regulus was, in fact, *not* building Isa a house.

Or well, he supposed he’d have to now, but that hadn’t been the crux of it all — the essence had been getting Mr Nott in this library.

A brief silence followed.

“She doesn’t *need* a house, does she?” Mr Nott mused, brow furrowing faintly. “She’s got the estate in Damascus. One in Greece. If she wants something closer — here in Manchester — we could have it arranged before breakfast. And you’ve two estates in your own name as well, don’t you? How many houses should one want, really?”

Regulus forced a light chuckle and nodded. “Yes, you’re right, of course. Between us, we’ve no shortage of inherited properties. But this… wouldn’t be like those. It would be new. Just ours. I thought I might model parts of it after this place, actually. She’s always said she

loves it here. Especially the garden. And, well — this library."

He let his eyes wander deliberately over the towering walnut shelves, the amber sconces, the orderly spines.

"She's right, you know," Regulus added. "This library is exquisite. I can see why it's her favourite room."

He quickly pushed down the knowledge that Isa had never once claimed any particular fondness for the library. She liked to read, yes, but she'd never said anything of the sort. Still, he hoped Mr Nott wouldn't realise that because otherwise, his plan would be far too obvious.

Mr Nott gave a thoughtful nod. "Yes. Generations of books in here. Mostly family collections — some older than the estate itself. Though I've always preferred the library in Damascus."

Regulus made a show of contemplation, lifting his glass slightly.

"Mind if I take a look around?" he asked. "I'm sure you know I'm rather fond of libraries myself. Might find some inspiration for ours."

Mr Nott chuckled. "Be my guest. I'll check on the girls, make sure they haven't rearranged the drawing room again."

Regulus was so pleased he half-feared Mr Nott might hear his heart leap.

The moment the door clicked shut behind his future father-in-law, he moved. He quickly strided toward the far right corner — the genealogy section.

Although lineage was important in general in the wizarding world, and more specifically in pureblood circles, everyone knew that the Notts held a special obsession — so much that it was practically their family doctrine. Several renowned magical genealogists had come from their family — the most famous, and most recent, being Mr Nott's own brother, the author of *The Sacred Twenty-Eight*, the definitive volume on Britain's pureblood elite.

Of course, the holy grail would have been to gain access to *his* library — the one at his estate. Regulus was quite certain he could find information on *any* magical family there. But drawing attention to himself was the last thing he could afford, and considering he'd long gone out of his way to avoid Isa's rather terrifying uncle, showing up

at his door now would raise all the wrong questions. Surely, though, the brother of Cantankerus Nott would have some relevant material, too.

Unbidden, the Dark Lord's words about the Horcruxes echoed in his mind.

Each time, I was inspired by someone great. A founder. A visionary. A sorcerer whose legacy I respected. And so, I've placed them in places I trust the most.

To continue his plan, Regulus had to know everything that could be known about the Dark Lord. Had to know who could have possibly inspired him, had to know what places he could possibly trust… Yes, it all had to start with the Dark Lord himself. And for that, he needed a name, a heritage, a lineage.

It felt so surreal, so incomprehensibly foolish now that he didn't even know the Dark Lord's real name. He had blindly followed, blindly *trusted* a man who hadn't even trusted his followers with his own name. Sure, Lucius probably knew it, Mr Nott probably too — but it wasn't common knowledge. Everything about the Dark Lord was a mystery. And Regulus couldn't exactly go around asking questions about the leader of the Revolution without drawing a very particular kind of suspicion.

But surely a wizard that powerful couldn't have been Muggleborn. There was simply too much power in him to be the first in his bloodline. No — the power the Dark Lord wielded had to be a culmination of power and legacy over generations.

Which, in the grand scheme of trying to destroy him, was frightening, but also came with one advantage — his bloodline would be traceable.

And so, Regulus set to work.

*****

Regulus spent the final days of the summer holiday with his thoughts caught in an endless loop — thinking, rethinking, overthinking. On and on his mind went.

He couldn't tell whether it was the upcoming meeting with Valaine that distracted him from the newly discovered information, or the newly discovered information that distracted him from the meeting.

Either way, it was impossible to quiet his mind — his thoughts kept spinning between the two.

Tom Riddle.

Regulus was as certain as he could be that that was the Dark Lord's real name.

He'd deduced the Dark Lord had to be in his fifties or early sixties — with a margin of error, of course, since surely splitting one's soul would have some effect on one's apparent age. Regulus had traced every pureblood family he could find records on, methodically ruling out those he knew personally and those who were indisputably dead. In the end, there was only one possibility.

The Dark Lord had come from the House of Gaunt — a once-noble line fallen into a bit of obscurity, known for their isolation. And so, Regulus had been right into thinking that someone with that kind of power had to come from a powerful bloodline. The Dark Lord was traceable not just to the Peverell family, but also to Salazar Slytherin himself.

What *had* been surprising, though, and had made him actually gasp, was the realisation that the Dark Lord's father had been a Muggle.

The Dark Lord was a halfblood.

His mother a Gaunt, his father a *Muggle*.

Regulus had no idea how to process the fact that the leader of the Revolution — followed fanatically by the oldest, proudest and purest wizarding families — was not even a pureblood himself.

The knowledge made his head spin continuously. And just as it seemed to settle, his thoughts would spiral back into the other grand happening — the meeting with Valaine. He couldn't stop wondering who this mysterious witch was. Couldn't stop thinking about who Valaine deemed just as capable as herself. Surely someone her equal, operating in Britain, would be a familiar name? Someone he'd at least heard of?

He barely slept for two nights. He was glad that Evan and Barty spent the final days of summer at the Rosier estate to indulge Mrs Rosier, so that Regulus could spiral in peace.

So, on the last morning before they were due to board the Hogwarts

Express, Regulus Apparated into an alleyway in East London. The sky was dull, and he walked briskly through the rows of terraced houses towards some pub nestled in the neighbourhood. He briefly considered the possibility of running into James — or his brother — then shoved any thought of them aside.

Regulus was running slightly late and he quickened his pace, one hand in his pocket curled around his wand just in case. He pushed open the door, scanning the room quickly and then let his gaze fall on Valaine, seated at a table in the back, her black hair tied back in a sleek ponytail, green eyes flicking to him the moment he entered.

He gave her a tight nod — and then his gaze shifted, landing instantly on the woman seated beside her.

A flicker of recognition stirred at the sight of her. She was still young, but definitely some years his senior. She had warm brown skin and dark curls tucked loosely behind her ears. He immediately noticed there was something striking about her, something sharp.

Regulus sat down at the table.

The woman leaned back in her chair, an amused smirk playing on her lips.

“Well. Hello there, Baby Black.”

Regulus blinked, feeling the equal parts of sharpness and playfulness in her gaze.

“Do I know you?”

She extended a hand with a glint in her eye.

“Well, now you do."

He shook her hand.

"I’m Dorcas,” she said. “Dorcas Meadowes.”

Chapter 5: Of Beer & Mentoring

Chapter Notes

> A day later than scheduled, but I made it!
>
> Thank you, as always, for all your wonderful comments and reflections and praise. You guys make my day! (repeatedly, again and again!)
>
> Quick scheduling note: I won't be able to post the next chapter this coming Monday (blame the holidays, life, blabla), so I'm pushing it back one week. That means the next update will come the Monday after next. After that, we're back to our regularly scheduled weekly Monday updates.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It took Regulus approximately five minutes to understand why Valaine considered Dorcas her equal. Her brown eyes, though warm and inviting, seemed to pierce straight through his skin, eager to tear down the wall of pretences and carefully constructed lies he'd built around himself. He had the distinct feeling that she didn't even need to look to notice everything. Her voice, though neither unkind nor unwelcoming, had a knowledgeable timber to it. At the same time, she seemed to glean knowledge from silence, and convey messages without saying a word.

Regulus was equal parts impressed and unsettled.

Valaine, who apparently considered setting the two of them at the same table her job done, ordered them a drink to avoid attracting attention, and then left.

They didn't speak until the sociable barmaid came over and set down two tall pints — long glasses of amber-gold liquid with foaming heads that looked nothing like the Butterbeer that Regulus was familiar with.

Regulus eyed the drink nervously, then let his gaze flick up to the person across from him.

"So you know my brother?" he asked.

Dorcas's expression was unreadable as she leaned back in her chair.

“Yes, I do,” she said simply.

Regulus knew this game. He knew very well that she knew he wanted more information — that he wanted *anything* about his brother — but she didn’t take the bait.

“I recognise your name,” he continued, when Dorcas, unsurprisingly, remained silent. “Your family’s originally from Cyprus.”

Dorcas took a sip of the strange drink.

“That’s an oddly specific thing to know,” she said, a hint of surprise colouring her voice.

And so the game continued. Regulus knew it was now her turn to want him to elaborate — to explain how he happened to know something so specific about a woman he’d only just met.

Unfortunately for her, he didn’t flinch.

First impressions mattered, and he intended to match her. Besides, he wasn’t particularly keen to reveal that he’d spent hours scouring the books he had stolen from Mr Nott’s library, poring over every magical lineage in the country and abroad in order to trace the Dark Lord’s ancestry — all as part of a plan to bring him down.

“When did you go to Hogwarts?” he asked instead.

Regulus stared at the large glass in front of him, knowing he’d have to try it at some point. With a sudden stiffness in his spine, he picked it up and took a sip — and almost spat it out.

God, it was *disgusting*.

Trying to hide his distaste, he glanced around the pub and, to his utter bafflement, realised everyone else was drinking it — without complaint — and, even more concerning, seemed to actually be *enjoying* it.

He made a mental note to never take anyone of the Revolutionaries to a Muggle bar. Metaphorical bridges would be burned by this utter abomination of a drink faster than fiendfyre could ever accomplish.

Dorcas, with a perceptiveness that really put Regulus on edge, had clearly clocked his struggle with the drink and took a generous, almost theatrical gulp before replying.

“I graduated four years ago. I was in Slytherin too.”

Regulus let out a dry huff. “Funny,” he said, swallowing the bitter aftertaste of the Muggle beer. “What are the chances a pureblood Slytherin ends up on this side of the war?”

Dorcas shot him a sly smile. “Well — no slimmer than the odds of both Black brothers siding with Dumbledore, I’d say.”

“I’m not siding with Dumbledore,” Regulus shot back instantly.

Dorcas raised an eyebrow. “Well then — the Ministry?”

Regulus scoffed. “No.”

Dorcas took another sip of her beer, then winked. “Well, you’re obviously not with Voldemort either. So, sorry to break it to you, but no matter how much you protest, that means you are, effectively, siding with Dumbledore.”

An uncomfortable silence settled between them.

“The real question is why,” Dorcas went on, nodding toward his arm. “You have the Mark. And I know more and more so-called ‘Revolutionaries’ are branded these days — but Eleanor told me you were among the first.”

Regulus felt a sudden unease crawl up his spine. He was alarmingly off-balance — she likely knew a great deal about him, while he knew almost nothing about her. He felt the urge to tip the scales back somehow, but he had the distinct feeling she wasn’t finished yet.

“There must be something special about you, to have been chosen so early. Which makes the cost of switching sides even higher.” She exhaled, then met his gaze. “So tell me. *Why*?”

A beat passed.

“Does it matter?”

“Of course it matters,” she said flatly. “I can’t just take your word for it. All I know is that you are the poster boy for Voldemort’s inner circle. You’re the pureblood prince, aren’t you? Engaged to the Nott girl. Branded before you were of age — and I’d bet good gold you’ve killed. You were in Hohenhain, and I believe you were instrumental even in the prison break. You’ve been secretly doing Voldemort’s dirty

work for at least a year, and I think even longer — because the whole Legot incident just after you finished at Beauxbatons cannot be a coincidence." She paused. "You've got a lot of blood on your very young hands."

Regulus winced.

"So either you did all of this because you were forced — which would make you a coward, and I don't think a coward would turn on Voldemort. Or you weren't forced, which makes the question even more interesting — why? And why now? What changed?"

A tense silence followed. Regulus's throat had gone so dry he thought his voice had gone.

"Or," Dorcas continued coolly, "you're just fucking with me. And you're pretending to be a spy."

Regulus felt a flicker of heat rise in his chest. He hadn't expected this conversation to go like this — he'd assumed they'd talk logistics, practicalities, perhaps trade intel. He hadn't expected to be subjected to some kind of interrogation, to be picked apart.

Which, he now realised, had been foolish. Of course Dorcas wouldn't trust him immediately — it was the perfect ploy, after all, a double agent. Besides, the woman was clearly sharp, as sharp as any intelligent Slytherin he'd ever met. She knew her facts. She'd done her homework.

He knew he'd have to give her something. But he couldn't give her the two truths that mattered most.

He couldn't say anything about the Horcruxes. The risk was too great. If the Dark Lord found out Regulus knew, it was over — he'd never die, and the war would not end until he'd taken over the entire magical world. And he couldn't tell her about James. Not just because it was dangerous. No, mostly because he didn't want to. The love for him was his — his to feel, his to carry. His to protect. Reducing it to a tactical explanation felt like betrayal.

So instead, he gave her the truth he *could* give.

He swallowed, throat tight.

"I was misinformed," he said. "Or — no. I believed in something that either never existed, or changed so much along the way that it

stopped existing."

Dorcas didn't move. Her expression was serious and open, and something in it prompted him to continue.

"I believed — I think I still do, in a way — that the wizarding world we know, the one built over centuries, was in danger. Endangered by influences from communities that have, for a good reason, always lived separately from ours."

He thought about Muggleborns and halfbloods. About Muggle trends finding their way into magical life — the cigarettes or the way robes were increasingly mocked now. How traditions were seen as stuffy and outdated instead of sacred, of being celebrated. How no one seemed to be listening.

"I truly believed no one was listening to these concerns. That no one was listening to the people raising the alarm — pointing out that this world, this legacy, is slipping through our fingers, and that no one is taking it seriously. That no one is doing a bloody thing about it."

His throat was so incredibly dry. Against his better judgement, he took a sip of the bitter Muggle beer just to swallow the bile rising in his throat.

"But somewhere along the way… it turned," he said quietly. "It stopped being about protecting our values or traditions. It stopped being about protecting our communities. It started to become, more and more, about power. About domination. About the idea that some people — by blood, by birth — were better. Not just stronger, but worth more. It became about subjection, not protection."

Dorcas's eyes narrowed, just slightly.

"And you don't believe that?" she asked. "You don't think you're more powerful than a Muggleborn?"

Regulus didn't flinch.

"I think, with generations of magic behind me, I *am* more powerful. That's a fact."

Her eyebrows arched.

"But that doesn't mean I'm intrinsically, ethically or morally *better*. And it doesn't give me the right to dominate anyone."

He took a deep breath and thought about all the Muggle works he'd read over the years. All the philosophers and political strategists and moralists he'd read from, and then realised there was one thing that mattered most.

"On the contrary," he said quietly. "People should understand — *with great power comes great responsibility*. It's time to act accordingly."

Regulus swallowed hard, then went on. "I was misinformed. Naïve. I thought the Revolution was meant to make the world a better place, to protect our community."

Dorcas's voice was low. "Alright, and what is it, if not that?"

Regulus huffed. "A pretext. An excuse to conquer what's feared."

Dorcas's gaze seemed to bore right through his skin. It made him utterly uncomfortable.

"So you don't fear?"

Regulus thought about the warmth of Marie-Anne. He thought about Miller's family. He thought about Davies's almost self-sacrificing, final words to Isa. He thought about Sirius's warnings. He thought about Fred in the garage. And most of all, he thought of the thing he had feared the most — he thought of his irrevocable love for a boy named James Potter.

He drew a breath.

"No," he exhaled. "Not anymore."

Dorcas leaned back slowly, studying him. She tilted her head slightly.

"Just the amount of pride you must've swallowed to say all that makes me believe you."

Instant relief fluttered through his chest.

"But," she added, with a smirk, "I'm not stupid, Baby Black. I know you're leaving something out."

He tensed, about to speak — but she raised a hand to stop him.

"You don't need to explain. You don't need to lie. You don't even need to tell me now. I believe you — I believe where your loyalties lie. But if we're going to do this, properly — the more we trust each other, the

stronger we'll be."

Regulus nodded once, then swallowed.

"I might tell you," he said, voice softer now. "One day. But it's… personal."

Dorcas raised an eyebrow, then gave a slow, almost gracious nod.

"All right. Fair enough." She straightened up slightly, her tone shifting. "Now — let's talk practicalities."

It turned out that Dorcas was, in fact, the ideal candidate to partner with. For one, she came from a respectable family. There had been a few Muggle marriages somewhere down the line — hence why the Meadowes weren't among the Sacred Twenty-Eight — but that was generations ago, enough to consider the family pure enough by most standards. The family had also stayed politically neutral throughout the war so far, which was an added advantage.

Of equal importance was the fact that Dorcas worked at the Ministry — in the Department of Mysteries. If, by some unlikely yet very unfortunate twist, people found out that Regulus had been regularly meeting her, it could be spun. He could twist a tale of how he'd been trying to forge discreet ties at the Ministry, to impress the Dark Lord later with his initiative.

Still, it was crucial that no one found out about their alliance or Regulus's allegiance — neither the Revolutionaries nor Dumbledore's people, who, as Regulus had only now learned, called themselves members of the Order of the Phoenix.

Valaine, somehow, had managed to position Dorcas as the one 'tracking' Regulus for the Order — meaning that, on paper, Dorcas was responsible for monitoring his movements and reporting back. It explained why she had urged Dumbledore to give Regulus the freedom to leave Hogwarts — despite both of them knowing perfectly well that his mother's illness was just a cover. After all, if he wasn't seen doing anything interesting for the Revolutionaries, there'd be nothing for her to report.

"So, we meet every Hogsmeade weekend and every holiday, at the very least," Dorcas said, sipping her second Muggle beer. Regulus had opted for some surprisingly strong coffee. "And of course, if anything urgent comes up."

Regulus thought about the almost surreal fact that he would board the Hogwarts Express the next day, marking the end of his freedom. From then on, the moves he made would be closely watched, either by the Revolutionaries, or by the 'Order'.

He was sure that this was probably the best setup they could manage under the circumstances. Dumbledore had granted him permission to leave the castle and Voldemort believed he was using the excuse of his supposedly sick mother while secretly working for Him.

But there was always the risk of slipping up… Always the chance of making one wrong move. And the consequences would be severe.

He suppressed a shudder and pushed the thought aside.

"The first upcoming meeting is the first weekend at Hogwarts."

Dorcas let out a snort. "They couldn't have pushed it back a week? So that you could attend without having to leave Hogwarts?"

She had a point. It would've been more practical to meet this weekend instead— that way, Barty and Evan could have come, too.

It was then, suddenly, that Regulus realised that Dorcas — and by extension, the Order — didn't know anything about Evan and Barty's marks, or their official involvement in the Revolution. The few times either of them had crossed paths with the other side during raids, they'd been masked, so they had been completely unidentifiable.

A tight knot of unease twisted in his gut.

Some part of him felt the obligation to tell her. It did concern two students at Hogwarts, whose activities Dumbledore didn't know about. On the other hand… Regulus felt highly reluctant to rat out his friends, to drag them into this ploy… and it wasn't as if the information was very relevant — not yet, at least. Not as long as they were protected by the walls of Hogwarts and couldn't be doing anything. So, he decided not to tell her. They weren't exactly trading intel yet anyway.

"I think it's because of the raids," Regulus chose to say instead. "There's been a lot of those this week. There's some wounded, and I'm sure some Revolutionaries are still abroad."

Dorcas snorted. "Oh, you actually do call yourself Revolutionaries." She smirked. "We call you lot Death Eaters."

Regulus didn't miss the sharpness in her voice. He shrugged. "Well, there's a lot of Revolutionaries that prefer that name, even." He thought of Barty's entirely too-long monologue on how the term Death Eaters was 'at least properly terrifying'. "They think it inspires more fear."

She gave him an unreadable look. "Well, the raids have kept everyone on edge. We're lucky there haven't been casualties yet."

"There was a close call with Longbottom and Fortescue, I heard," Regulus offered.

"Yes," she said, expression darkening slightly. "We're lucky they're recovering. They're good in the field."

She downed the last of her beer in one swift go, then exhaled, pushing her glass away.

"Well, Baby Black," she said, tone light again, "I think it's time we parted ways."

They both stood and Regulus moved to pay for their drinks. Just before they stepped outside, Dorcas turned back with a smirk.

"Well," she said, smirking, "I feel like I've just witnessed a historical event."

Regulus blinked. "What?"

"Regulus Black," she said, gesturing around vaguely, "paying for Muggle drinks in a Muggle pub with Muggle money." She barked a laugh. "Honestly, the world's not devoid of miracles after all, is it?"

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"Merlin, where's the bloody party?" Barty muttered, swinging the compartment shut behind him with a dull *thud*.

Evan followed close behind, glancing back out at the corridor before slumping into the seat across from Regulus. "Can't really blame them, can we?" he said. "With everything going on."

Regulus knew exactly what Barty meant. Never had he seen such a grim atmosphere on the Platform as he had that morning. Children were ushered into the train quickly, their parents rushing off, and the only feat giving away that the rush wasn't about them wanting to get

rid of their child but instead about the fear to linger too long for security reasons, was the tight embraces, tearful kisses and desperate last glances.

“Yeah, well,” Barty said as he flopped into the seat next to Evan and stretched his legs, “what is it you’ve always said, Black? Sometimes things have to get worse before they get better? Or was it ‘sacrifices must be made for the greater good’?”

Regulus’s throat turned dry, his stomach churning instantly at the words he, indeed, had said repeatedly. Once upon a time, he had believed those words. Now, they left such a sour taste in his mouth he thought he might actually gag.

He gave a non-committal nod and turned away, picking up the folded copy of the *Daily Prophet* he’d left on the bench beside him. Which was, truth be told, not the best distraction, as the front page only echoed what they had been talking about.

FIVE DEAD IN SUSPECTED MUGGLE ATTACK — MINISTRY URGES CALM

In the early hours of Sunday morning, a Muggle household in Northumberland was attacked, leaving five dead. Officials believe the incident may be linked to recent unrest, but no suspects have been named. The Department of Magical Law Enforcement has launched an investigation and assures the public there is no immediate danger.

Regulus swallowed in an attempt to rid himself of his painfully dry throat. His eyes flicked to another short article on the front page.

WIZENGAMOT DEBATES TOUGHER AZKABAN REFORM
Proposals for harsher sentencing and expanded holding protocols for ‘high-risk’ magical citizens were introduced this week, fuelling debate about the balance between security and civil liberties. Proponents claim the measures are necessary to combat rising threats from anarchist and extremist groups.

He was interrupted by Barty’s voice. “Why d’you even bother reading that rubbish? Half of it’s bollocks anyway.”

Regulus shrugged, knowing that Barty had a point. The Prophet had been printing slanted stuff for years, but over the summer it had grown worse; often raids and attacks putting the Ministry in bad light were downplayed or sanitised, which made that the general public

had no real grasp of how much the Revolutionaries were gaining ground. At the same time, though, the *Prophet* had turned its claws on the Death Eaters and anyone branded 'lawless'. But just as often, it targeted modernists and dissenters — anyone speaking out against the Ministry's increasingly authoritarian stance, all under the pretence of 'fighting chaos'.

"You've got to know what they're feeding people, Barty," Regulus said. "Because people are eating it."

Before Barty could reply, the compartment door slid open again. Amaryllis strolled in, followed by Melania. Everyone greeted each other, but Regulus didn't miss the stiff look that passed between Evan and Melania — or the way she pointedly sat on the far end of the bench.

Regulus was just about to shoot Evan a questioning look when Isa swept in behind them, plopping down beside him and pressing a kiss to his cheek.

Instantly, the atmosphere in the compartment shifted.

Melania and Amaryllis both lit up with delighted expressions that made Regulus feel oddly cornered. Evan snorted quietly, while Barty raised an eyebrow and turned, dramatically jutting out his cheek.

"Oi," he said. "Don't I get a kiss too, Nott?"

Isa rolled her eyes but — probably to everyone's surprise but Regulus's — got up, gave Barty a quick peck on the cheek and finished off with ruffling his hair.

Barty let out a loud laugh, clearly delighted. "So," he said, waggling his eyebrows. "Can we expect you to be taking over our dormitory this year, Mrs Black?"

"Oh, Crouch," Isa replied sweetly, "I might — just to hex you in your sleep for calling me that."

"Aah, but you must be *so* thrilled to wear the Black name."

"Oh yes, she did indeed lack an important name," Amaryllis cut in dryly, tossing her hair over one shoulder.

They all laughed and the conversation flowed, but Regulus barely heard a word. He glanced across at Evan, who gave him a wry,

knowing smile. Regulus didn't return it, but instead turned toward the window, letting the passing scenery blur.

He really didn't want them to be weird about this — it was already awkward enough for him and Isa. But they had found a sort of rhythm, some kind of… system that made it work. A very fine line on which they balanced, raising only the indisputably crucial topics, but leaving the others as they were. A can of worms didn't *need* to be opened, after all.

But of course, their friends didn't truly understand the situation. Barty knew that it hadn't been their choice, but definitely let his pity get overshadowed by both the knowledge that Isa and Regulus did have a very intimate relationship, and the envy for Regulus's situation. And, as far as Regulus was aware, neither Amaryllis nor Melania knew just how arranged the whole thing was.

And these were just his friends. Regulus thought of the rest of Hogwarts and all that they had been fed about the engagement over the last few weeks.

He was pulled from his thoughts by a very long and suffering groan from Barty.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, the Prefect's meeting."

Isa snorted. "Well, this might be the first year you're actually thinking of it on time, Barty. I'm proud."

"Who's Head Boy and Head Girl anyway?" Evan asked.

"I heard it's Bones from Gryffindor and Smith from Ravenclaw."

Some thought seemed to strike Barty. "You know, I sort of expected it to be you two," he said, glancing between Regulus and Isa.

Amaryllis nodded. "Me too."

Regulus arched a brow. He hadn't particularly thought about it at all. But then again, he had been rather busy.

"It would've made sense, right?" Barty continued. "You're never in trouble, you two have definitely broken some record on taking the most subjects—"

"And it would completely fit the whole engagement thing, too!"

Melania squealed. “Oh, it has something romantic to it, doesn’t it? The Head Boy and Head Girl, engaged—”

Isa groaned. “Oh, sod off.”

Barty laughed, then sighed. “Well, though Bones is bloody annoying and Smith’s voice creeps me out, it’ll definitely be better than last year.”

The girls shot him a questioning look, but Regulus already had a very good inkling where this was headed. He felt a pit grow in his stomach.

“At least I won’t be bossed around by bloody *Potter* or that Mudblood Evans.”

Amaryllis snorted. “Oh, it wasn’t *that* bad, Barty.”

“Speak for yourself, Greengrass,” Barty shot back.

It was then that the realisation struck him. It wasn’t like he didn’t know, or never thought about it, but from time to time, the realisation would just smash into him like a fierce hex — the realisation that two such important parts of his life were so deeply incompatible, so indisputably irreconcilable. The reality that Barty and Evan — his best mates besides Isa — had no idea about James. No idea about how Regulus had been loving him for years now, no idea about how close they had gotten — about all the stories James would tell for hours on end about the Potters, about the three little moles on James’s thigh that Regulus didn’t only *know* about, but had kissed so tenderly, so many times. About the fact that James’s eyes were hazel, but turned a perfect shade of gold in the sunlight. About all the ways James had declared his love — while kissing every knuckle of his fingers separately: *I-love-you-so-much* for one hand, *oh-how-I-love-you* for the other. Or the way he’d look at him — so gentle, so kind, so heartbreakingly in awe — right before coaxing Regulus to his peak of pleasure. Or the way he’d nuzzle into Regulus’s chest while still half-asleep, breathe in his scent, then let out a soft sigh and smile so contentedly it made Regulus’s chest ache.

James had become so entrenched in his life, in his very being, that Regulus was sure he’d started making up part of his soul, his existence — and here he was, sitting in front of two of his best friends, and they had no idea.

But just as Evan and Barty didn’t know about that side of Regulus,

James didn't know about the side Evan and Barty *did* know. James had no idea he bore the Mark, no idea about his role in the Revolution. No clue how closely Regulus stood to the Dark Lord.

Oh, how torn his life had become. How split in pieces his life was — the walking embodiment of his own story; always, torn, always caught in between. Between his brother and the rest of his family. Between loyalty to the governor and loyalty to himself. Between doing what he wanted himself and doing what others expected of him.

Like two hands tearing at opposite ends of a single paper, pulling it apart at the spine, inevitably tearing it to pieces.

And he wondered — where did this leave him? Was any of it his story at all?

"You alright, Reg?" Isa whispered, pulling him from his thoughts.

Regulus quickly shook off the dread coiling low in his stomach, and offered her what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

"Yes, of course," he mumbled.

Isa nodded, but didn't seem convinced.

*****

Regulus could remember several moments when he hadn't wanted to return to Hogwarts.

Not his first year — no, he'd been so excited, so thrilled to finally attend. Being the last in line of the Black household, and after years of Bellatrix's taunts about staying behind, not even Sirius's alarming insistence that Regulus would be sorted into Gryffindor too could dull his spirits.

His second, third and fourth year, he'd still been excited. Glad, even, to be freed from the tense, stifling atmosphere at home with Sirius falling out with Father and Mother more and more.

But that pattern shattered after the Christmas holidays of fourth year — the winter Sirius left. That was the first time Regulus had truly dreaded returning, although he hadn't particularly wanted to stay home either. But coming back to Hogwarts a few days after everyone else — as he needed to recover from the happenings with Mother — and knowing people would be whispering about Sirius's fallout with

the family…. well, he'd felt uneasy at best.

Every return since had brought something to dread — the aftermath of Beauxbatons, or whispers, or rumours, some looming event or some event past.

So no — anxiety about coming back to Hogwarts was nothing new.

And yet, nothing had prepared him for his return this time.

He'd expected things to feel strange because of the engagement, and because three of their usual group weren't there anymore — leaving him, Barty and Evan as the de facto people ruling the dungeons. And, well, he had been right about that. There was no escaping the stares he and Isa received, or the whispers that echoed through the corridors, or the glances in class — some bewildered, mostly from halfbloods or Muggleborns, mocking the absurdity of being engaged while still in school; others, often purebloods, watching them with admiration. Some were a strange mixture of both.

But, surprisingly, that wasn't what unsettled him most.

No, the strangest thing of all, the thing that filled him with this low, constant thrum of trepidation, that small, inescapable reminder that something was off, a sort of dread always simmering in his bones — was the fact that this was the first time he walked the halls of Hogwarts without Sirius or James.

Although Sirius had never particularly been a support beam for him at school — they had, after all, developed this unspoken rule of mutual avoidance already before Sirius had been formally disowned, only reconnecting during the holidays — he had always *been* there. At the Gryffindor table. On the Quidditch pitch. His barking laugh echoing through the corridors. Always some prank pulled somewhere at someone, marking the unmistakable presence of Sirius Black.

And now, he was gone.

And only now did Regulus realise how grounding and oddly comforting that presence had been — knowing Sirius was somewhere, somewhere close. That Regulus had some vague inkling of what his brother was doing, how he was living. That he knew his brother was safe.

Now, he had no idea. Yes, he knew where he lived. He knew he knew Dorcas — though he had no idea how or why or in what capacity. He

knew he was part of the Order, but again he had no idea what that entailed, what that *meant* for Sirius's life. And that was the crux of it all. He had no idea. No clues. Nothing to go by but the knowledge that the safety of the castle had been replaced by the stark, terrifying reality of Sirius being a soldier in the middle of a war — and that Regulus would have to live with that, with knowing *nothing* , if just to keep himself from losing his mind.

And James… oh, James.

Everything reminded Regulus of him, as if the castle had become one enormous shrine to him. Every corridor, every classroom, a memorial to something sacred they had shared.

The antechamber he passed several times a day — where they had first kissed on purpose. Where they'd once hidden beneath the Cloak and overheard Davies saying goodbye to Isa. Where the prelude to their final goodbye had played out.

Or the pitch, where Regulus had played so many matches against him, attempting to outwit the Gryffindors by catching the Snitch as quickly as possible, trying not to be distracted by the marvel that was James Potter on a broom. The pitch where he'd had the honour of playing on James's team under the Hogwarts banner. The pitch connected to the locker rooms, where so many private, intimate moments had passed between them.

The seventh floor, the room with the ensuite showers. The room where they had spent their final night together. *You feel like magic, love. You always feel like magic*.

The library, where he'd once been fetched by the very strange combination of Isa and James, after accidentally eating James's hash brownies smuggled into Beauxbatons and ending up high as a kite.

And, of course, that old, deserted Charms classroom on the third floor. The room where it had all begun. The room where they had met for the ASS-programme first. Where they had met so many times, secretly, for the Quidditch screenings later. The room where Regulus, without him even knowing, had fallen in love with James. The room where they had shared their first kiss.

And now he was gone. And like with Sirius, Regulus had no idea where James was, what he was doing, whether he was okay. And the castle… the castle felt hollow, empty. Stripped of anything lively and beautiful and meaningful. Every room, every inch a painful reminder

of everything he wanted to have, perhaps even had had, but couldn't have and now never would.

And, for the first time, he wondered, whether it had indeed always been their world to blame for that, or that it was, perhaps, just all on him.

*****

The only true upside of returning to Hogwarts was that Regulus got to see Miller again. Apart from the Quidditch match, he hadn't seen her all summer, and her humour and endless chatter felt like a breath of fresh air. Still, he hadn't forgotten about Isa's warning, nor his own understanding that their friendship came with great risks. He didn't want Miller to notice his sudden caution and take it the wrong way, so he just gently nudged their friendship into more secluded corners of the castle. He didn't sit with her during meals, for example, but asked her to meet him under the tree near the lake, or in a quiet nook of the library, or in the common room when most of Slytherin was out enjoying the last of the summer sun.

Tonight, after dinner, they'd opted for the lake. They sat on a blanket, with a few pieces of treacle tart Miller had nicked from the Great Hall.

Regulus lay on his back, staring up at the cloudless sky, while Miller chattered on — about her little brother, her visit to her grandparents, her gran's ridiculous stories, and eventually, memories of her mum. How she'd loved classical music and football, how she used to grow daisies in the garden, and how the flowers always reminded Miller of her.

"My second name is Daisy, you know," Miller grinned.

Regulus snorted. "You're joking."

"No, really!" she said, playfully offended by the accusation. Then she let out a soft breath. "She really liked the flowers — that's why the name. Charlotte *Daisy* Miller."

She went on, and Regulus listened, letting the warmth and fondness wash over him as he watched her gesture animatedly and laugh a little too hard at her own stories. Even the ones steeped in loss didn't seem to bring sadness — didn't dim the light in her eyes that were full of humour and wistful joy.

He chimed in now and then with a question or comment, keeping the

conversation moving, until an unusual silence fell between them. Then Miller shifted the subject entirely.

“Can I ask you a question Cap?”

Regulus didn’t miss the change in tone. He waited for her to continue.

“Why do you like me?”

Regulus froze.

Having a girl as his best friend — and having grown up with Cissy, Bellatrix and Andromeda practically functioning as sisters — Regulus prided himself on being, well… attuned to girl stuff.

He was relatively unfazed by menstruation, surprisingly good at painting nails — and had learned, along the way, that there was a real difference between purple and fuchsia — and in general, he considered himself fairly aware of the sensitivities that came with girls.

And with that came the hard-won understanding that there was *absolutely* a wrong way to answer this question — no matter how much they claimed otherwise.

Unfortunately, none of that wisdom spared him from the fact that, at his core, he was still painfully awkward.

He tried to think. Why did he like Miller? He liked her talent on the pitch, for starters — he knew she’d be happy to hear that. He liked her cheerfulness, which wasn’t naïve or ignorant like with most girls, but rather a conscious choice — a decision to see the good, despite knowing the bad. She was strong, resilient, easygoing. That was something he really admired. Surely he could say that? Or did she want something about her looks? Cissy always liked that.

He groaned inwardly and gave her a quick glance from the corner of his eye.

He supposed she was pretty — or well, he *knew* she was, with her dark hair and green eyes and that goofy kind of smile. Did she want to hear she was pretty?

He was *not* ready for the embarrassment.

“Err,” Regulus went with eventually, scratching his head. “What do

you mean, Miller?"

Miller clearly avoided his gaze, flopping onto her back to stare at the sky. That made him even more uneasy.

"Well," she sighed. "I mean… you… being who you are… why do you like me?"

Regulus arched an eyebrow. "Me being… what exactly?"

Miller groaned, turning her head toward him. A faint, embarrassed blush crept across her cheeks. "I'm a Mudblood—"

"Don't call yourself that," Regulus blurted out.

And then, somehow, times seemed to stand still.

He had always used that word. He'd always referred to Muggleborns as Mudbloods — not with malice, just as a matter-of-fact synonym. It had been so ordinary, so ingrained, that it didn't even register as offensive or a slur. But somehow the knowledge that it was, in fact, offensive and a slur, must have crept up on him over time, and now that she'd said it, he couldn't stomach it.

And just like that, he realised he hadn't used the word in months.

"Well, I am one, am I not?" Miller countered, oblivious to Regulus's inner turmoil. "My parents… my family… they're all Muggles, and people hate them."

Regulus shook his head, drawing a deep breath. He knew he had to do Miller justice, that he had to do this right.

"Miller, it's not about hate. Not really. It's about fear."

Miller snorted. "No, Cap. I'm pretty sure it's about hate. And… in some way, I get it."

Regulus's brows shot up. "What do you mean?"

She gave him a wry smile, then looked away. "You know I don't get the paper at home. I don't have an owl…" She trailed off, cheeks pinking — and Regulus realised, with a sharp pang of guilt, that she probably couldn't afford one. "But Denise and Violet filled me in on what happened over the summer. Even saved me some papers to catch up."

Regulus nodded, silently urging her to go on.

“Well… if my dad knew that all those ‘gas leaks’ or ‘carbon monoxide incidents’ weren’t accidents—” Regulus didn’t know what either of those things were, but clocked this as a very inappropriate moment to indulge his curiosities “—I mean, of course we knew something was going on. All those deaths. All that chaos. But I never thought… And then I read something about the Statute of Secrecy…”

Ah. Regulus suddenly saw exactly where this was going.

“And well, it makes sense, right? It sucks that an entire society has to hide and bend over backwards just so Muggles won’t find out, because if they do, they’d want to exploit all the magical folk, make them do their bidding. I don’t know, I sort of… get why people hate that…”

Regulus shook his head. “No, that’s not… that’s not how it works.”

Miller blinked at him, confused.

“We’re all people, Miller. Yes, the Statute is frustrating sometimes. But it makes sense that Muggles would want to use magic.” He thought of Marie-Anne commuting between the bookstore and her home. Of all the hours Fred spent fixing a car by hand. Of all the hours Muggles lost doing things that took wizards a mere flick of a wand. “It’s convenient, so of course Muggles would want a part of it. “But that doesn’t change the fact that we’re all… *human*… All deserving to live a dignified life. And the Statute’s just a small price to pay to protect that. Covering our tracks, keeping magic hidden — I’d say that’s *less* of a burden on us than what Muggles deal with every day without magic.”

It took her a moment to process Regulus’s words, then she shrugged and turned her face back to the sky. Something about the gesture told Regulus she wasn’t entirely convinced.

“Really, Miller,” he said quietly, “it doesn’t matter that you’re Muggleborn.”

“I don’t know, Cap,” she sighed. “Feels like it does, you know.”

Regulus rolled his eyes, then shifted onto his side to look at her properly. “I mean it shouldn’t. Don’t ever think you’re not worth anything. You are. You’re just as capable as anyone else — more, even. You’re doing everything we are, and you’re doing it without years of magical upbringing to back you up. Honestly, the professors

should take that into account."

Miller snorted, the corners of her mouth twitching into that familiar, goofy smile. Her eyes twinkled again. "Tell that to McGonagall, Cap. Maybe she'll finally give me an A for once."

Regulus laughed.

"Or," she added, "tell it to our new Defence Professor."

"Professor Hoffman?" Regulus asked. He hadn't had a class with him yet — as it was scheduled for tomorrow — so he had no idea what to expect. He'd seen him at breakfast in the Great Hall, but that obviously hadn't been enough to form a real opinion. "What's he like?"

Miller tilted her head slightly, frowning. "I don't know…" She trailed off, brows pinching together. "He's… different from our previous Professors, I think."

*****

It turned out that Miller was right.

Regulus made his way to the Defence classroom, walking in step with Isa. Their pace was quick, mostly because they were trailing behind Barty and Evan — who were, unsurprisingly, practically vibrating with excitement about the upcoming class.

It made a nice change from the usual complaining, particularly from Barty. He'd made it clear for ages that he didn't see the point of most subjects at Hogwarts — or of the institution itself, for that matter — and had floated the idea of dropping out more than once over the summer holidays.

Regulus should've seen it coming. After all, Barty had now glimpsed what he liked to call the 'real world'. He'd had tastes of life outside his father's suffocating grip and the castle's suffocating walls, and it was no surprise he'd found… something there. Bantering with Yaxley, going on raids with Rabastan and Evan, being toasted and praised at the Serpent until he was too drunk to walk — it was surely all far more thrilling than anything Hogwarts could offer.

Regulus, though, was glad that Barty *had* come back, which was probably thanks to Mrs Rosier's influence on Evan, and Evan in turn working his magic on Barty. Regulus was already worrying himself

sick over Sirius and James — he really didn't need to add another person to the list of people he worried about.

"Ah, finally," Barty declared as they approached the classroom. "The only subject offered by this school that actually matters."

Evan snorted while Isa rolled her eyes.

They slipped into a row just behind Barty and Evan — and again to no one's surprise, right at the front of the room.

Regulus half-listened to the two of them whispering about what might be on the syllabus as the rest of the students filed in. Defence Against the Dark Arts wasn't technically a compulsory N.E.W.T. subject, but the vast majority of students still took it, especially after years of rising unrest. Now, with the war, many considered it a necessity, even.

"Maybe we'll get to fight werewolves this year," Barty said under his breath. "Or vampires."

Isa snorted audibly.

Barty turned to give her a deadpan look.

"I'm sure it'll be fun," Evan added, dry but not without amusement.

It was *not* going to be fun.

The classroom fell silent in an instant when the new Professor arrived. He stepped in, shut the door with a quiet *click* , and walked briskly to the front.

He was a rather short man and had a very thick, carefully groomed moustache — probably to make up for his lack of height. His accent was unmistakably German — the kind that had been softened by years in Britain but still gave him a *ss* many Parselmouths would be jealous of.

Now, Regulus knew the bar had been set remarkably high in previous years by Professors Thorne and Valaine — both brilliant and sharp — but even so, this was something else completely.

The man was stiff, grey, utterly unremarkable. His expression remained politely blank, his posture rigid. He spoke in a droning monotone, and Regulus's interest slipped away like sand through his

fingers the moment the man asked them to put their wands away.

Today, it seemed, would be about class expectations, N.E.W.T. protocols and behavioural guidelines.

Professor Hoffman began to outline various rules, grading systems, departmental expectations and Ministry alignment policies in meticulous, dull detail, while Regulus could *feel* the excitement drain from Barty and Evan in front of him.

Regulus was just beginning to lose the battle against his own rising boredom when some of Hoffman's words suddenly actively registered.

"—now, as part of this year's programme, the Ministry has asked me to introduce a mentoring initiative."

Regulus sat up straighter.

So this was a Ministry man.

"Nothing to worry about, of course," Hoffman said, adjusting his spectacles. "It's nothing grand. Just a small addition to ensure you are being properly guided in your career considerations and your future beyond Hogwarts. The goal is simply to make sure you're positioned to do your best."

Isa's hand was in the air before the sentence had even landed.

"Yes, Miss…?"

"Nott, sir."

Recognition flickered in Hoffman's eyes.

"Alright, Miss Nott."

"What exactly does this mentoring programme entail?"

Hoffman clasped his hands behind his back. "It will consist of monthly one-on-one meetings — just a conversation between student and mentor, in this case myself. A space to discuss your academic progress, your goals after Hogwarts, how you're feeling about your studies and your overall trajectory."

Regulus saw this mentoring initiative immediately for what it was.

A pretext. A way to keep tabs on them, to quietly monitor their

thoughts, affiliations, and movements under the guise of support.

Dread pooled in his stomach, sharp and sudden — and he silently cursed himself for ever having dismissed Hoffman as irrelevant.

He glanced sideways at Isa. She met his eyes, and her contemplative expression told him she saw it too.

This was bad news.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome back to another thrilling episode of REG AND HIS DADA PROFESSORS. 💀 💀

What do you think? Will this one stay alive? Will he be a spy? Turn out to be an assassin? Will Reg chop off one of his limbs, nick his engagement ring and and rope him into a life-threatening espionage mission??

Stay tuned! 👀

Also, if you're wondering whether Reg has been suddenly, miraculously cured of all his prejudice — yeahhh, no. He hasn't. His worldview is still shaped by years of indoctrination and upbringing and that stuff runs DEEP, thus doesn't disappear overnight.

He's changed a lot — coming into close contact with Muggles, reading more widely, being exposed to James's ideas, and then of course, the whole disillusionment with someone he once considered the leader of the revolution. He saw a very different side of that person, and the illusion shattered — hard. And for someone like Reg, who has a long history not just of sexual abuse but also intense psychological manipulation, something like Obliviation isn't just a breach of trust, but betrayal on a whole other level.

Throw in the respect he'd developed for Thorne, the words of the Potters, and everything else he's experienced recently, and you get... this. A boy who, despite everything that was ingrained in him, is beginning to come around. But it's a slow and tiring process and I just wanted to say that it isn't all gone, and that what left didn't disappear overnight.

OK thank you for coming to my talk. See you soon!

Chapter 6: Of Sorcerers & Supermarkets

Chapter Notes

> Hi everyone! Thank you so much for all your wonderful comments — they honestly make my day every time. 💟
>
> As promised, a new chapter is here! I'm really hoping to get the next one out by Monday, per the usual schedule… but life's been a bit chaotic lately and writing 7k+ chapters every week is.... well, ambitious. I'm also working on a little side project that I think some of you might enjoy — but that's a story for later. So, while I'm doing my absolute best, I can't make any guarantees about Monday's chapter.
>
> That being said… I hope you enjoy this one!
>
> Lots of love xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Regulus once again thanked the clever plot that granted him the freedom to slip out of Hogwarts through Slughorn's fireplace whenever he pleased. As he'd told Dorcas, many of the Revolutionaries were out on missions or otherwise occupied, which was why they hadn't been able to meet sooner, but it still made him uneasy to be leaving the castle on the very first weekend of term. Carte blanche or not, he disliked drawing attention to himself. At this point, it didn't matter whose attention it was — the Dark Lord, who he was working to undermine; Dumbledore, who could never learn *he* was the spy; Dorcas, who could never know the real reason he wanted the freedom to come and go.... He was playing so many sides, balancing along such fine lines and on such treacherously thin ice, that any slip could be fatal. So he really could not afford messing it up.

But he had no choice. It was the first relatively big meeting since the start of summer, and with his role at Hogwarts, he was expected to attend. Evan and Barty had been jealous of course, now they knew exactly where he was going. Regulus knew that Barty would give anything for the freedom he had. The fact that Regulus had secured it by pretending his mother was ill, while Barty's mother truly *was*, made him feel slightly nauseous. He ignored the feeling as he made his way to Bellatrix's from Grimmauld Place.

Not all meetings were held at her estate these days. Regulus knew — and the thought unfortunately never failed to stir a faint, involuntary gag — that his cousin took great pride in hosting at her own home. But as the ranks of the Revolution grew, so — logically — too did the reluctance to welcome the entire crowd into her private domain. More often now, gatherings were held at a desolate estate in the wilds of Northumberland. So far, Regulus had not been there and had only attended the smaller, more exclusive meetings still convened at Bellatrix's.

As he walked the eerie hallway and mounted the stairs to the first floor, the memories, as always, came flooding back — the basement, Davies pressed against him under the Invisibility Cloak, that sharp flare of utter desperation when Bellatrix ordered the floos to be disconnected, the eyes of Demir as Regulus killed him, only two floors below… No matter how often he came here, there was always this heavy feeling of dread and fear — instant and choking. He wished this meeting had been at the Northumberland estate instead.

He pushed all his emotions and thoughts down violently and composed himself before stepping into the meeting room.

It was the usual entourage. There was Bellatrix, hovering close to the Dark Lord delightedly, always with that unsettling predator gleam in her eyes. There was Yaxley and Lucius in the corner, looking relaxed. There was Mr Nott chatting quietly with Mr Rosier over drinks. There was Rabastan and Rodolphus, offering him nods and faint smiles as he slid into a seat beside him. Even with so many freshly Marked, the group remained a closed circle, and Regulus noted that his freshly branded friends — Mulciber, Avery and Severus — were not invited.

It looked like a very mundane meeting. It began with nothing more than a routine run-through of the last few weeks; several attacks, several raids. The Revolutionaries had seized control of an important supply line for potion ingredients. And with the war escalating, they were building an infirmary of their own. St Mungo's was, in theory, neutral ground, an apolitical zone where everyone was supposed to be treated equally regardless of allegiance, but no one was thick enough to believe the hospital wasn't under the Ministry's thumb. And the more closely the Ministry seemed to monitor admissions and activities, the more covert the Revolutionaries had to become. So, together with a team of Healers, Cissy was overseeing the construction of a ward on the Northumberland estate's grounds. Many recent raids had been aimed at acquiring medical supplies — and from the number of times the Revolutionaries had crossed paths with modernists, it was

clear the Order was doing the same. Many modernists were, after all, also considered terrorists or anarchists by the Ministry. Funny, how that worked — how the Ministry had nudged two diametrically opposed movements into the same hunting grounds.

Besides these raids, they talked about Ministry infiltration — certain new contacts, a few setbacks, some recruitment. It was all rather routine, and although the information was valuable to him — particularly for what he could pass on to Dorcas — he wondered whether it had truly been worth leaving Hogwarts for.

It would prove to be an unexpectedly fruitful evening, though — just not at all in the way he'd anticipated.

The final item they covered was Regulus's role at Hogwarts. He shifted in his chair uncomfortably, his palms damp under the table, as the Dark Lord addressed him and the rest of the room turned to look. In a strange turn of events, Regulus was glad that he'd always been so awkward and nervous; at least now that he actually had something to be nervous about, it was oddly easy to stay in character.

The Dark Lord's instructions were the same as always. Regulus had to monitor students who might be sympathetic to the Revolution's ideals, and it was again emphasised how his activities had to stay entirely secret. Regulus had to swallow hard at that. If only the Dark Lord knew how much Dumbledore actually knew about his destination anytime he was supposedly visiting his ill mother…

Yet, none of that was what really mattered — or well, it did, but it paled in comparison by what came next, was completely overshadowed by the part that to the untrained ear was little more than idle end-of-meeting chatter but somehow, suddenly, greatly piqued Regulus's interest.

How something seemingly so trivial could actually ignite such an important revelation, set in motion something so important…

Mr Nott leaned back in his chair, swirling the last of his drink. "We've been talking about a larger strike," he said mildly. "Any firm plans yet?"

The Dark Lord only smiled faintly at Mr Nott's question. "No. We're still working on that."

The subject of a large-scale strike had been dubbed more than once over the holidays, but nothing concrete had come of it yet, so it was,

surprisingly, not *that* which made Regulus freeze in his chair. As always, he sat straight and with poise — as was expected of him — eyes fixed on his coffee as he idly stirred it, the silver spoon chiming softly against the cup Bellatrix's House Elf had placed before him.

Bellatrix's voice, light and almost wistful, cut through the air. "I can't wait. The Dementor attack was *such* fun. Can't we do something at Hogwarts? Tear it to the ground."

The Dark Lord chuckled like he was not at all troubled by this unhinged suggestion of his most loyal follower, but actually entertained — which he, Regulus realised, probably genuinely was.

"Ah, Bellatrix," the Dark Lord said, almost indulgently. "You must look beyond the current Headmaster. Dumbledore is an absolute fool, yes, but he did not found the school. Education is vital for the next generations, and once it has been… purified… nothing will stop Hogwarts from being the finest institute for magical learning. Do not forget it was established by the most capable witches and wizards of their time."

Bellatrix's smile twisted. "Except for Gryffindor and his sickening fondness for Mudbloods."

The Dark Lord laughed quietly, still amused. "Indeed. Despite his capabilities, I have no respect for him, if only for what he tried to make the school become. But remember, Hogwarts had three other founders, Bellatrix. And although Rowena Ravenclaw and Helga Hufflepuff were misguided in siding with Gryffindor, they, too, were formidable sorcerers."

Regulus couldn't say what it was, couldn't pinpoint what was the precise catalyst that set the thought ablaze in his mind, that made his mind unbiddenly, suddenly, go back to that memory he had relived to vividly. Perhaps it was that one word, *sorcerer* — the same word the Dark Lord had used during Mr Nott's Ritual.

Such a trivial exchange between Bellatrix and the Dark Lord, at the end of a meeting where much more important things had been discussed, mere seconds before they'd be dismissed, and yet it answered so many questions… Yet it would completely alter the history of the magical world.

*****

Regulus could not leave Bellatrix's house quickly enough. He did

everything in his power to keep his movements schooled and unhurried and even, miraculously, managed polite small talk with Mr Nott and Rabastan before excusing himself. But the moment he stepped into the Floo, his mind was racing faster than a Nimbus Two Thousand and his heart pounded so hard he feared it might burst from his chest.

Unsurprisingly, neither of his parents was there when he arrived at Grimmauld Place — Father was likely with some important client or colleague, and Mother would be resting upstairs. He knew better than to disturb her and instead stepped straight back into the Floo to Slughorn's office. It was disturbingly irrational, but he felt an urgent need to be back within the relative safety of Hogwarts walls, as if the realisation might otherwise spill out of his mind, bare for all to see. And no one could see, no one could know…

Instead of returning to the Slytherin dungeon immediately, where he'd be bombarded with Isa's concerned eyes and Evan and Barty's eager questions, he chose to take some time to wrap his head around it all. So he went to the only place he could think of — the Charms classroom.

His head was spinning so fast that he didn't even notice how this was the first time this school year he entered the room where James's absence had made the room feel so loud in its silence, or the fact that somehow, in a bizarre turn of events, it felt so strange to not see Lupin sitting there. And more so, how, besides this being so strange, it made him feel unexpectedly sad too.

No — Regulus was too preoccupied for that.

Sorcerer.

But remember, Hogwarts had three other founders, Bellatrix. And although Rowena Ravenclaw and Helga Hufflepuff were misguided in siding with Gryffindor, they, too, were formidable sorcerers.

He had used that exact word then as well — that time Obliviated from Regulus's memory. When Regulus had been bold enough to ask whether the Dark Lord had ever considered making Horcruxes. When the Dark Lord had admitted not only to considering it, but to having made them — and not just one, but four.

Each time, I was inspired by someone great. A founder. A visionary. A sorcerer whose legacy I respected.

And it all clicked into place. Not the delicate placing of the final piece in a puzzle, but the violent, searing impact of a hex — smashing straight through the board, scattering the pieces across the floor.

The Dark Lord had made four Horcruxes. Each time, he had been inspired by someone great, a founder. Regulus realised, very conveniently, that Hogwarts was founded by four sorcerers. But the way the Dark Lord had talked about Gryffin Gryffindor — the distaste, the outright disdain… The way he'd all but accused him of luring Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw into some treacherous ploy….

No. Gryffindor was not one of them in the Dark Lord's mind. What Gryffindor had done to Hogwarts must, to him, have been the deepest form of betrayal. The other three, though…

It left questions. Even if the Horcruxes were tied to them, what did that *mean*? What did that, in practice, entail? What form would they take?

Was he imagining things? Was he hallucinating?

No — he *knew* it. He felt it in his very bones. This was important, crucial. This was groundbreaking.

Yet, if Gryffindor was excluded, that left one… One Horcrux inspired by someone the Dark Lord held in the highest regard.

Regulus began to pace, circling the empty room. His mind kept replaying the scene from the Ritual over and over, replaying the conversation between the Dark Lord and Bellatrix. Replaying all the scraps of knowledge he'd pieced together so far — he thought about the book in Fez, disclosing how you could destroy one. Which was all very convenient, but not very useful now, as he had no bloody clue *what* he had to destroy in the first place. Thought about the hours spent in the libraries at Grimmauld Place, Black Manor, the Malfoys', Fez, poring over tomes on wards and protective charms. And lastly, he thought of the Nott library, where he had uncovered the Dark Lord's real name. *Tom Marvolo Riddle*. He thought of the revelation that the Dark Lord was a *Halfblood*, of how twisted it was that the most traditional families followed him blindly, following him out of a pureblood dogma he himself could never embody…

It didn't diminish the very powerful legacy that steamed in the Dark Lord's veins, though… The House of *Gaunt*, traceable all the way back to Salazar Slytherin himself, to the Pverells… Surely, despite his Muggle father, the Dark Lord would take immense pride in that.

The realisation struck him full in the face.

He drew in a sharp breath and sank shakily into the nearest chair.

That was it.

That was *it*.

One Horcrux tied to Salazar Slytherin, one to Rowena Ravenclaw, one to Helga Hufflepuff.

And one to the Dark Lord himself.

Each time, I was inspired by someone great.

Of course he would count himself among them. It was evident in everything, clear as day, that the Dark Lord considered himself the most powerful sorcerer of their age. Why wouldn't he create a Horcrux to enshrine that power?

Regulus's heart thundered. His palms were damp. He pushed himself to his feet and began pacing again, the rush of it all making his breath come so terribly fast.

So much had fallen into place from one idle exchange. For once… for the first time, he felt he was getting somewhere — felt like he was actually achieving something.

The only question now was… what next?

*****

Regulus realised there was, in truth, nothing more important than solving the mystery of the Horcruxes — to discover what they were, where they were, and destroy them. He tried very hard not to dwell on the fact that the entire future of the wizarding world rested in *his* palms and, more precisely, *his* brains.

He was already barely sleeping. His dreams were either plagued by the governor and his personal brand of terror, or haunted by Sirius — a recurring dream of his brother standing in a field with wand in hand, green light striking him, the life in his eyes snuffed out before Regulus woke, gasping, realising it had been a dream.

Other nights, he dreamt of James — dreams that, in essence, were better, because they weren't about death or dread or terror, but about James's smile; sometimes bright and warm, sometimes smug and

lopsided. He'd dream of James talking endlessly, twirling his wand idly between his fingers, or flicking popcorn into Regulus's hair with that insufferable grin.

He'd feel James's breath ghosting against his ear, murmuring words he could never quite catch but nonetheless made him warm all over his body, aching, wanting. Yes, they were better than nightmares of his abuser or his dying brother, but then — still half-dazed, he'd let his hand wander and he would *feel* James there in every move and pull, he'd feel his own stuttering breath as if it were James's and he'd hear James's sweet whispers in his ear as if he were actually there — and then, after, reality would come crashing in, the stifled moan of pleasure in his pillow curling into a sob instead.

James was not there. Regulus would likely never feel James inside him again. He would not hear soft words whispered against his ear, nor against his neck. He would never see that smile again, nor hear that laugh. And at that point, Regulus always realised these dreams were not so much better after all.

There wasn't a morning he woke refreshed. He knew he needed rest, knew his mind had to be sharper than ever, but Dreamless Sleep was out of the question; it would only cloud his thoughts further. All he wanted was to chase the endless loop of what-ifs, if-nots and if-sos, hoping one day something would suddenly… click.

Unfortunately, the outside world was oblivious to all of this, and life had absolutely no mercy.

It was only the second week back at Hogwarts, and he already felt as though he were drowning in responsibilities. For a start, he was — naturally — taking an astronomical number of N.E.W.T.s. There wasn't a single professor who didn't feel compelled to remind them every other minute how impossibly difficult the exams would be, and although term had barely begun, he'd already spent every evening holed up in the library until late. He suddenly understood why even Céline and her lot — the absolute daftest of girls — had practically lived there the year before.

And then there was the Captaincy. Regulus thought he'd managed to pull together a solid team. As always, Miller had been the star of try-outs. He'd almost lost his words — even frozen mid-air on his broom — watching her fly alongside the other Chasers, beaming with pride. But then the thought had crept in how brilliant it would be if she'd ever team up with James, and then his mind had drifted to James's

absence, and the fact that they'd never play together because James was gone and would never return and chances were that Regulus would never, ever get to see him again and — well, the whole thing had spiralled.

Still, although he had — despite his inner mental breakdown — managed to compose a decent team, it didn't take away the fact he had practice thrice a week and had to actually *captain* — all time and effort he could spend on things that were more important.

So, every free minute, Regulus spent on combing through history books, deciphering half-forgotten poetry about the Hogwarts founders and suffering through very peculiar old novels about them.

There'd been a breakthrough, he was sure of it — a lead, at last, a trail to follow… But said trail was still hopelessly overgrown and he had no where it might end. He, for one, didn't have the faintest idea what Horcruxes *looked* like. Sure, he knew it could be an object, or even a living thing, but he could just not… picture it. If he'd split his soul into a brick, surely it wouldn't just look like… a brick, right? And what did it *mean* to be inspired by people? What did that mean, in practice, for these Horcruxes?

Yes, there was a lead, but he felt none the wiser. All he had was the Founders — which meant every spare moment was spent digging through anything to do with the founding of Hogwarts and those behind it.

And then, on top of classes, the Captaincy, the Plan, and the reality that he was, in fact, and however horrible the thought, now a *spy* for the *Order*, he had his bloody new Defense Professor to contend with.

The notice had appeared on the common-room board. The seventh-years were to meet Professor Hoffman in private, spread alphabetically over three days and Regulus's turn was that same evening.

He felt it was yet another nuisance pulling him away from what truly mattered, so he stayed in the library until the last possible moment, sprinting for the second floor only at the stroke of the hour. At first he thought he'd timed it rather well, but then he realised this crammed schedule left him no time to actually consider the meeting, let alone prepare for it.

A grave mistake on his part, as it would turn out.

He knocked at the door, precisely on time.

“Come in,” Hoffman’s voice called.

Regulus entered tentatively, his gaze sweeping the room. It was… boring. The room was almost empty — there were a few books lining the shelves, some papers rolled neatly on the desk. Two cups and a cafetière hovered in the air beside an empty chair, where Hoffman gestured for him to sit.

“Good evening, Mr Black.”

“Good evening, Professor.”

He sat down. An uncomfortable silence stretched between them, and Regulus found himself unexpectedly nervous. He didn’t understand why — only that his leg had started twitching, just as James’s always did when he was anxious, and that his throat had gone suddenly, uncomfortably dry.

“Well,” Hoffman said at last, not a hint of humour or warmth in his voice, “you know why you are here.”

Regulus, in fact, did not know why he was there. He decided to wait it out.

“I’d like to discuss your thoughts on… your career.”

For a moment, Regulus was thrown back to fifth year, to Slughorn’s indulgent career talks. Only, this was not Slughorn, and Hoffman’s eyes — an unsettling, unreadable shade of blue — fixed him with a scrutiny that was anything but indulgent.

“…Alright,” Regulus said carefully.

“So,” Hoffman leaned back, “what did you have in mind after Hogwarts?”

Regulus froze.

What did he have in mind after Hogwarts?

He had never thought about it. Sure, he had always known what *wasn’t* an option — all the times James insisted Regulus could make a career out of Quidditch, Regulus had laughed, knowing that Mother would never allow it. In fact, so much of his life had been mapped by

other people's hands. He didn't even have a say in who he was going to marry.

But that wasn't the real reason he'd never considered it. There was only one thing waiting for them all beyond the walls of Hogwarts — the war. It had long been clear that every hour, every scrap of energy, would be consumed by it. Raids, recruitment, politics, manoeuvres. Even if he did take some Ministry post, it would be as pretext — to infiltrate, to recruit, to spy. Or a seat in politics, purely to steer the Revolution's agenda.

No. He had never thought about his career, because what career was there to imagine? There was only war.

And somehow, Regulus had the distinct feeling that Hoffman knew this already.

"Surely," Hoffman pressed, tilting his head, "someone taking that many N.E.W.T.s has a vision? An ambition? An idea of what he is doing it all for?"

Regulus's brain stuttered. He had no idea whether to blame exhaustion, the endless cycle of research and essays or Quidditch practice, but his mind went completely, utterly blank.

"…Err," he managed.

Hoffman's eyes sharpened, piercing as glass.

Regulus suppressed the urge to flinch.

Damage control. He needed damage control. He desperately needed to stop this before it got worse.

For all that he tended toward social awkwardness, he had never had difficulties with his professors. In that, at least, he was like his brother — or well, he was actually not *like* Sirius at all.

Sirius had been brilliant of course, outstanding in every subject — they had both been privately tutored all their lives, raised on generations of family knowledge, so excellence was more or less a given. But Sirius also had that charisma, that charm that won over professors who found his mischievous antics somehow more amusing than troublesome. And for those who didn't, his grades were enough to silence complaints.

Regulus had no such mischievous streak, which, he very well knew, came as a big relief to the staff when he arrived the year after his brother. He absolutely lacked Sirius's easy charm, but still — he was diligent, polite, attentive, excelling in every class. Professors liked him and they trusted him. It had always been simple, normal. Nothing more, nothing less.

Except, of course, for Defence.

He thought suddenly of Thorne — of the mentoring, of the recruitment for the Revolution, of killing him. And he thought of Valaine — how they'd run into each other during the most notorious prison break in centuries and how, at this very moment, they were… allies. It was then that Regulus realised that his Defence Professors were, very clearly, an exception.

"Mr Black?"

Regulus gave a subtle jolt, forcing himself to get it together.

"Err… well, I was thinking about something with Potions…"

Hoffman's eyebrows rose.

"Yes, well," Regulus continued, now actually sort of… getting it together. "I'm in Professor Slughorn's extracurricular Potions class, and I'm taking several N.E.W.T.s that would be useful if I were to become a potioneer."

"And you've thought about what line of work? Where?"

Regulus scraped desperately through the clutter of his brain.

"Well… I wouldn't want to work in a medical setting, per se, so not St Mungo's. I'd prefer… an independent practice. An independent potioneer."

"And have you found someone to work with yet? A mentor? A traineeship?"

Regulus coughed into his hand, uncomfortably.

"No."

"You realise you'll have to start applying quickly," Hoffman said.

Regulus nodded. "I'm sure… I'll find someone. Somewhere."

A silence fell.

“Ah,” Hoffman said at last, his gaze sharpening, “you mean with your name, the jobs are lined up for you already?”

Regulus schooled his expression, uncertain how to respond. He felt there was a certain accusation in that statement.

Hoffman apparently didn’t seem to expect an answer, as he cleared his throat and steered the conversation in a direction Regulus had not anticipated.

And if Regulus had thought his unpreparedness on the first topic had been bad, he was in for a shock — because this was far, far worse.

The coffee can clinked gently as Hoffman poured for them both.

Regulus eyed the dark liquid suspiciously. He was clever enough to only accept food or drink from people he trusted, people in his camp. And although Hoffman’s camp was… undefined, it was clear, at least, that he wasn’t in Regulus’s.

“What is going on with your mother?”

Regulus felt the blood drain from his face. “…Excuse me?”

Hoffman’s expression remained blank, but his piercing blue eyes seemed to strip away every layer of composure.

“You left Hogwarts Saturday evening.”

“Correct,” Regulus said slowly.

“The Headmaster had failed to inform me of the situation. But I understand you sometimes leave Hogwarts to visit your mother.”

Regulus nodded.

“Because she is ill.”

Another nod. His heart thundered so loudly he feared it must be audible. His palms were slick with sweat and he pressed them hard into his lap, hiding them from sight.

“So. What does she have?”

The question struck like a slap.

There was no diagnosis. No neat name for whatever it was she was supposed to suffer from. Regulus realised, with a nauseating jolt, how idiotic he had been never to consider people asking questions. He'd always been protected by Slughorn's indulgence and Dumbledore's double agenda.

"Mr Black?"

Focus. Focus. Tell him anything. Say *something. Talk*.

Somehow, Regulus thought of Sirius's last minutes at Grimmauld Place, and he found the answer there.

"She is… manic."

"Manic?"

In normal circumstances, Mother would have cursed him straight into the floor for suggesting such a thing — for telling the world she had psychological problems.

But well, desperate times and all that.

"It means…" Regulus began carefully, "well, people who are manic experience… extremes. Swings of mood, behaviour. Sometimes bursts of energy, sometimes… the opposite."

Hoffman gave a short cough, almost amused.

"Ah. You misunderstand me, Mr Black. I am well aware of what *manic* entails. What I fail to understand is why that requires *you* to leave Hogwarts."

Regulus froze.

"You are not a Healer. Nor a Psychohealer," Hoffman continued, his tone still maddeningly neutral, but every word sharp as glass. "So in what way are you meant to help her?"

Regulus felt himself shrink beneath that stare. "Err… well… it gets better when I'm there. If I'm around on… particularly bad days."

A silence stretched.

Hoffman's eyebrows rose slowly. "That must be a heavy burden to bear."

Regulus blinked. "…What do you mean, Professor?"

"It is a dangerous dynamic," Hoffman said. "For someone to be psychologically dependent on another — particularly when that bond is between parent and child. It is not healthy, Mr Black. Not for her, and certainly not for you."

Regulus's mouth had gone dry. He didn't know what to say. Hoffman was right, of course. If the story had been true, it would have been unhealthy.

He cleared his throat, his voice more strained than he intended.

"Well… perhaps, Professor. But I can't really… change anything about it. Only make it more… bearable for everyone. I suppose."

Hoffman's eyebrows lifted again. And then, for the first time, Regulus saw him smile.

It was not a nice smile. It was cold, suspicious, knowing. It sent a chill down Regulus's spine, and left his mind utterly blank save for one thought: he should have come prepared.

Every nerve in him screamed that this was bad news, that he had just made a mistake.

And oh, how right he would be.

*****

Regulus fell into a rhythm of fulfilling his many obligations, trying to sleep, forcing himself not to think about James or Sirius, and stealing whatever scraps of time remained to pore over research about the Founders.

He was always worrying though, the sensation constantly humming beneath his skin. Only rarely did he get a moment where he could truly let go, where he could temporarily forget about the misery in the world and how it was up to him to end it.

One of those moments came in the form of quiet afternoons with Miller.

Autumn had set in and the castle grounds had vanished beneath a blanket of red and gold leaves. The afternoons were still just warm enough to sit outside with a coat in the rare case the sun broke

through the clouds.

“You always carry snacks around, don’t you?”

They were sitting on a blanket under the usual old tree near the lake. It was a late Saturday afternoon and the clouds were beginning to threaten rain, that characteristic soft grey settling over the sky. In the distance, Regulus could just make out the red-and-gold blur of the Gryffindor Quidditch team zipping across the pitch. For the briefest instant, Regulus swore he caught a flash of messy hair, heard that bright, beautiful laugh — and then the truth caved back in. James wasn’t there. James would never be there again. He felt a sudden, sharp ache in his chest and was glad that Miller interrupted it.

“The food here’s terrific, Cap,” she said cheerily, chewing on a left-over sandwich from lunch. “Arguably the best thing about Hogwarts.”

Regulus supposed she was right, even though Hogwarts chicken didn’t quite hold a candle to Whiskerley’s fried tenders back at Black Manor. He scanned the last paragraph of his Potions essay, eager to wrap it up so he could skim through Miller’s Transfiguration homework before the clouds finally broke and drove them indoors.

“Like — three full meals a day! Proper roast potatoes, puddings, stews... and *so much* of it. The teachers must be up at the crack of dawn to get it all done.”

Regulus snorted instantly. But when he glanced over and saw her face, he realised she wasn’t joking.

“Wait,” he said. “You think the *Professors* cook the meals?”

Miller gave him a sheepish look. “I mean… obviously they’re not slaving over pots and pans or anything, and I *know* you can’t conjure food out of nowhere — but surely they… prepare it magically with ingredients, right?”

He tried not to laugh — truly, he did.

She caught the expression anyway and turned a little pink. “Oh, come *off* it, then. What’s the answer, smartarse?”

“You know about House Elves, right?”

“Yeah, I do,” she said, and Regulus saw in real time how the retaliation dawned on her face. “Wait — *really*?”

That sent them spiralling into a very long conversation about the kitchens and House Elves, pureblood customs, enchanted soups and the absurdities of Black family dinner etiquette.

“That’s like… heaven,” Miller sighed wistfully. “Just call on your House Elf and — bam — full dinner spread in under a minute. My gran would faint.”

And that was when Regulus came to a very shameful realisation.

He’d been to Muggle London and Manchester countless times. He’d drank coffee in Muggle cafés, suffered through disgusting Muggle beer in Muggle pubs, had watched Fred dismantle entire engines in his garage, had mastered the fine art of ice skating on a frozen pond. He could drive a car and knew — due to Sirius’s Muggle Studies books — a rather great deal about house appliances, Muggle history and so on.

And yet, he had absolutely no idea how Muggles got their *food*.

He felt so mortifyingly *thick* that his cheeks went hot just thinking about Miller noticing he had no idea about such a crucial part of Muggle life.

Still, unfortunately but also unsurprisingly, curiosity won over pride, so after a moment’s hesitation, he cleared his throat, shifted uncomfortably on the blanket and kept his gaze fixed firmly on the clouds.

“…So,” he said at last, staring hard at the clouds, “do you get your food… delivered?”

There was a small pause.

Miller blinked at him. “Well… some things, yeah. Milk, eggs. Juice, maybe…”

Another silence followed. Still looking at the sky above, Regulus nodded solemnly, as though that could hide his stupidity. “And eh…,” he said, cautiously, “...the rest?”

Miller turned to him, staring at him for a very uncomfortable amount of time. Then slowly, like she couldn’t believe what she was about to say: “Wait, Cap… you’ve never been to a *supermarket*?”

He glanced at her, then let out a quiet breath. “…No?”

She laughed so hard she nearly doubled over.

“Alright, alright, settle down,” he muttered, nudging her leg with his foot. “What even is it?”

“Oh, Cap. You’re in for a treat. Let me do the honour of describing one for you.”

And she did. She launched into a detailed description of what a supermarket was. She told him about the rows of food, the baskets, the trolleys with the dodgy wheels. She told him about the meat counter and the smell of the bakery aisle. Told him how she used to loiter near the butcher’s aisle until he gave her a slice of garlic sausage just to get her to go away. Told him how sometimes her gran let her weigh the bananas.

They somehow ended up deep in conversation about *snacks*, which, he knew, Miller considered not just a food group but an actual raison d’être.

“Marathon bars,” she said, the reverence dripping from her voice, “are better than anything Honeydukes has ever produced. Sorry, Cap, but that’s just the truth. Same for Opal Fruits. And Bazooka Joe gum? Bloody *iconic*.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Bazooka… what?”

She waved a hand. “Doesn’t matter, can’t get it here anyway. The best of all, though, are the *Double Dips*.”

Her eyes lit up in a way that suggested she was describing a holy artefact. He did his best not to snort.

“What on earth are *Double Dips*?”

She smiled wistfully. “It’s this sweet, right? Comes with this little sherbet packet and a stick of candy — well, two, if you're lucky. You dip it, and—” she made a moaning sound so obscene he wasn’t sure whether to be alarmed or impressed, “—just *divine*.”

“You brought some, then?”

Her face suddenly fell. “Didn’t think to. Stupid – oh man, I *should’ve*. Even if it were just for you to try them.”

Regulus, eager to get a rise out of her, shrugged. “No way they beat

Fizzing Whizzbees."

Miller made an incredulous sound. "Oh, *yes*, they do."

"Impossible."

"*Really.*"

He sighed. "Well. We'll just have to put it to the test. Head-to-head: Double Dips versus Whizzbees."

She snorted. "Shame we've got to wait three bloody months to settle it, though."

*****

Later, in the common room after dinner, Regulus lay sprawled across the long, velvet sofa, his head resting in Isa's lap. She was absently scratching his scalp and playing with his curls, twisting a strand between her fingers as she chattered on with Barty, Evan, Amaryllis and Melania, who'd gathered nearby with their books and a half-hearted game of cards.

"Did you get to finish Binns's essay?" Melania asked.

Isa gave a solemn nod. "Yeah. Most boring thing I've ever written — but it's done."

Barty groaned. "You swots — don't tell me you were in the library *all day* again?"

Amaryllis sniffed. "Some of us take our education seriously, Crouch. And don't forget Isa and Regulus are doing, like, twenty N.E.W.T.s."

"Must be hard," Barty said with mock sympathy, "having to leave your little swot-cave just to eat on weekends."

The others laughed, but Regulus didn't. He just let the conversation drift over him, eyes half-lidded, relishing the familiar, lazy sensation of Isa's fingers in his hair. If he were a cat, he'd have purred. And although he was no cat, when she scratched just behind his ear, he hummed — then immediately stopped, mortified.

"Only three of us were in the library," Melania said, stretching with a yawn. "Me, Isa and Amaryllis."

Evan raised an eyebrow. "Where were *you*, then, Black?"

Regulus, eyes now closed completely, murmured, “With Miller.”

A brief silence followed.

Barty gave a short snort and leaned forward, grinning. “What do you two *talk* about, even? Let me guess — she moans on about her teenage girl problems?”

Regulus didn’t rise to it. His eyes opened now, he stared at the back of the nearby armchair, still lying sideways, lost in thought.

He was quiet for a moment, thinking back to that odd little picnic by the lake.

Then, suddenly, he sat up straight, brow furrowed like something had just clicked.

“Have any of you ever heard of a *supermarket*?”

What followed was a beat of very confused silence.

Evan blinked. “What’s a super?”

The others turned to him.

“I mean,” Evan continued, cautious now, “supermarket. Sounds like a market for… supers?”

Melania frowned. “Is it like… supper?”

Regulus looked around at his friends and, for a moment, felt as if he were seeing them all differently — or perhaps seeing their world differently. So insulated, so *unaware*.

He realised then how separate their lives were from the Muggle world. Yes, wizards and witches bought food too, of course. They had grocers and butchers, local apothecaries for herbs and spices. Most pureblood families sent their House Elves for such errands, others that had to do without an Elf had shop themselves. But everything was done small-scale, local. There were no vast halls of packaged food, no aisles stacked with tins and branded boxes, no processed meals ready to be popped into some sort of buzzing machine.

Amaryllis leaned forward, intrigued. “Well, what *is* it, Regulus?”

He huffed. “It’s where Muggles buy their food.”

That set Barty and Evan off, both collapsing into laughter.

“Oh, *honestly*,” Barty cackled, “your mind just *goes*, doesn’t it, Black?”

Isa snorted, then raised a single eyebrow, looking utterly unimpressed. She leaned down, her voice low enough for only him to hear.

“Muggle bookshops not enough for you, Reg?”

Regulus met her gaze, then gave a small shrug.

He realised then that they probably, indeed, weren’t.

Chapter End Notes

next up: Regulus & the Muggle supermarket adventures ??

Who knows ;)

Chapter 7: Of Sadness & Halloween

Chapter Notes

> Later than I wanted, but here I am with a new chapter for the weekend. I am so thankful for all your wonderful comments and praise and assessments. Your engagement with the story makes my day over and over again. Really, you're the best!
>
> I will respond to comments soon, but it was either that or getting the new chapter out. I'm having more difficulties getting all of life done lately, which is why I am uploading slower than usual (which is still quite fast, I know). I love this story so much, and there's so much still left to tell and I can't wait to share ittttt.
>
> Again, thank you so much for your kind words ❤

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"...AND SLYTHERIN WINS!"

The stands erupted — with Slytherins chanting and howling in victory, while practically the rest of the school booed loudly.

Regulus couldn't care less for either noise. He was soaked to the bone — rain plastering his curls to his skull, sweat prickling under his clothes — and every muscle in his body screamed. All he wanted was a warm shower, dry clothes and his soft bed.

Not that he wasn't glad or proud that they'd won the match against Gryffindor — no, he was *thrilled*. Gryffindor was nothing like the team of the past few years. With their star Chaser and one of their Beaters graduated, the Macmillan sisters had been scrambling to patch together a team. There was definitely some room for improvement in the cooperation with their new Chaser, and their Keeper was hopeless. At the same time, Slytherin's Chasers had clicked spectacularly this season — with Miller outflying them all, and well… in short, it'd resulted in Gryffindor's deafening defeat.

Regulus was absolutely sure that James would somehow hear about it. The realisation made him strangely glad and very sad at the same time.

Now, although Regulus felt like he could sleep for days, he knew there would be no dodging the victory party Evan and Barty had been

plotting with some overexcited sixth-years. His best friends had been gagging for an excuse to throw one — to 'blow off some steam' — for some time now, and Regulus didn't have the heart to ditch them now it was finally happening. Besides, Isa had mentioned that half the House had been talking about nothing else all week, and with him not only being among the most senior Slytherins, but also the bloody Captain himself, he could hardly slink off to bed and leave them all to it.

So, it was with great reluctance and a large dose of self-pity that he changed after dinner, fastening his robes in front of the mirror while Evan and Barty chattered behind him.

"—the girls have handled the decorations, the bar's sorted, and music's in the sixth-years' hands," Evan declared.

"How very generous of you," Regulus said dryly, tugging a cuff straight, "entrusting such crucial responsibilities to the sixth-years."

Evan and Barty lay sprawled across Evan's bed. Evan's head was sunk in the pillow, while Barty lay upside down beside him, his feet near Evan's head. Every so often Barty would poke Evan in the face with his toes, resulting in Evan retaliating with a swat of a pillow.

"Well, obviously," Barty said, grinning, "with us gone after this year, we've got to train the new generation."

Regulus snorted, but he didn't get to retort as Evan cut him to it. "It's already dull without Snape, Avery and Mulciber. Imagine when *we're* gone. This place will be dead."

"The dungeons will be positively frigid," Barty sighed dramatically, clutching his chest.

"Yes," Regulus shot deadpan, "because they're otherwise so warm."

"Indulge me, Black," Barty said with a roll of his eyes, though he couldn't hide his smile.

Just then, Isa entered the dorm, leaning against the doorway. Regulus was still focused on his reflection so he didn't look at her straightaway, but he caught Barty and Evan straightening in the glass.

"Evening, Nott," Barty whistled low. "Looking forward to the festivities?"

Isa tilted her head. “I suppose. Amaryllis and Melania are still setting out the food.”

Regulus turned then — and froze instantly.

Isa’s hair was loose, tumbling over her shoulders nicely. What was *not* nice was the light pink dress she wore, clinging in ways Regulus had absolutely not prepared himself for. It was too low at the top and too short at the bottom. Regulus was sure that if she bent even an inch, her entire arse would be on display. It was most definitely unsuited for the Slytherin common room, where half the boys would already drool over Isadora Nott dancing if she were in their grandmother’s moth-eaten nightdress.

No. Absolutely not. *Not* going to happen.

Regulus barely registered Evan’s muffled snort or Barty’s stifled laugh as he was still very much frozen to the spot.

“What,” he eventually managed with a small voice, coming out a touch too high, “are you wearing, Isa?”

She arched a brow, clearly weighing his tone — then stepped into the room, twirling once, the hem of the dress flaring as her hair danced around her shoulders. “Our party dresses,” she said simply. “Mel, Amar, and I — we’re all in pink tonight.”

Regulus was still frozen to the spot.

A brief silence followed.

Then, sharply, “Barty, Evan — I’m sure Amaryllis and Melania could use some help with the snacks.”

Barty had shifted to lounge against the headboard next to Evan, smirking like the devil. “Oh, in your dreams, Black. I’m *not* missing this.”

Evan snorted again, but there was a telltale hesitation that suggested he was, in fact, considering leaving.

Isa folded her arms and stepped closer, planting herself in front of him challengingly.

“Yes, Reg. Whatever you’ve got to say, you can say in front of our friends.”

Regulus flinched.

It was so typical Isa. Of course she'd think that by shooing Evan and Barty away, he was trying to protect *his* image, whereas actually, he was just trying to protect *hers*.

Well, if that was how she wanted to play it.

"You are not wearing that dress in public, Ies."

Her mouth twitched into a dangerous smile. "Wanna bet?"

Barty let out an uproarious '*oooh*', clearly delighted by the course of events, as Evan made a very poor attempt at smothering his laugh with a pillow.

Regulus's tone sharpened. "I'm not joking, Ies. You're *not* wearing that."

"And why's that, Reg?" she shot back sweetly.

"Have you *seen* yourself?" he asked, his voice unfortunately pitched higher than he intended.

"Mm." She drifted toward the mirror, posing beside him theatrically. "Yes, I have. I like the colour. And it makes my arse look rather splendid, don't you think, Crouch?"

Barty practically fell off the bed, laughing. "Glorious," he said without missing a beat, hand on his heart. "Truly a gift to mankind."

Regulus whipped around, glowering. "Say one more word, Crouch, and I'll hex you bald."

Barty didn't seem alarmed in the slightest. He only grinned wider, clearly delighted. Evan's shoulders were shaking with laughter now.

Regulus decided to ignore them.

"Ies," he tried again, his voice sharp, "you cannot wear that to a party. Wear it at home, wear it in your dorm, wear it when it's just us — just not in a room full of boys, who've also been drinking!"

Her eyes flashed. "And what *if* they're boys and they've been drinking?"

Regulus felt the anger in him flare. Why did he have to spell this out

for her? So intelligent and yet *this* she couldn't grasp?

"Isa," he now all but snapped, "you cannot wear a dress like that and not have the entire lot of drunk, horny teenagers undressing you with their eyes. And Merlin knows what they do with the mental image afterwards—"

Judging by Isa's expression, this was not the correct thing to say.

"And why," she demanded, fire sparking in her voice, "do *I* have to conform to the sexist, filthy thoughts of men? Why do I have to bend over backwards—"

"Oh yes," Barty cut in gleefully, "please do, Nott."

With a flick of Isa's wand, a book flew across the room, smacking him square in the face.

"*OW!* " Barty howled.

Evan collapsed sideways on the bed, wheezing with laughter.

Regulus knew that this was the moment for damage control. He stepped forward, catching Isa gently by the wrists. His voice dropped, urgent but kind.

"Ies, I know. You're right. I *agree* with you. It's unfair — you should be able to walk around in your bloody underwear and not have anyone bat an eye—"

"Yeah, Nott, try it sometime!" Barty piped up. "You know — for science."

Both Isa and Regulus turned in eerie unison, shooting daggers at him.

Evan was half-crying from laughter now. "B — shut up before they actually kill you."

Regulus turned back to Isa and continued. "But you're not going to dismantle the patriarchy with a bloody *dress*."

Isa sighed and rolled her eyes, her shoulders relaxing a fraction.

"This isn't just about the dress," he continued after a pause. "It's bigger than that. There are eyes on you, Ies. And… you're my fiancée now."

Her head snapped up, glare sharpening again. “Oh, don’t you *dare* pull that card.”

Regulus raised an eyebrow, utterly unapologetic. “I just did.”

She knew she’d lost. With a sharp tug, she pulled her wrists free and let out a feral noise of frustration. “Fine! I’ll just be *ugly* and wear a hideous, decent, *boring* dress, shall I?”

She stormed off towards the door.

“You know you could wear a potato sack and still be the most beautiful out there, right?”

A whistle cut the air — Barty and Evan in perfect harmony, nodding furiously. “*Smooth.*”

Isa froze in the doorway, biting her lip so hard she almost broke skin, trying — and failing — not to smile through her still evident frustration.

“Oh — *you* — ARGH!” she shouted. Then she slammed the door behind her.

Regulus let out a long breath, turning back to the mirror.

“Smooth, Black,” Barty repeated, eyes dancing.

Regulus shot him an unimpressed glare. “Oh, piss off, Crouch.”

*****

To absolutely no one’s surprise, Isa didn’t so much as glance in Regulus’s direction for most of the evening. She spent the night mostly in the company of Amaryllis and Melania, sipping at some cocktail or else slipping behind one of the alcoves made of bookshelves to smoke in secret.

The only times Regulus caught sight of her were when she drifted onto the dance floor, and it didn’t go unnoticed that she carried less brightness, less life than normally at parties. The mood suited her outfit well — arguably the most stiff and joyless set of robes from her trunk. It was in flat grey, long and uncharacteristically unflattering. Regulus instantly saw it for the message it was.

They’d had similar arguments more times than he could count, though in different settings, with different catalysts. There was always the

same battle beneath it all: Isa's endless and naive conviction that she could change the nature of things, and more specifically, of men. Regulus would love to live in a world where Isa could wear whatever she liked without consequence, but they simply did not live in such a world. And at the end of the day, one had to play the hand they were dealt.

For his part, Regulus buried his irritation regarding Isa and her naive idealism in the company of Evan, Barty or his teammates. It was, on the whole, a good party. The entire common room was draped in green and silver, snacks and drinks covered every available surface, and the group of sixth-years took their Wireless very seriously. Regulus suspected it had much to do with getting into the good graces of the seventh-year clique. Regulus didn't really know them, save for the Carrow twins who played on his team.

It was strange how he could play an entire match alongside them without issue, only to suddenly remember, watching them now, that he had seen their father die. That he had been there when an Auror took him down.

He quickly tore his gaze away, fixing instead on the twins' friends, who were bickering over what to play next. He could barely name any of them. He knew that it was literally in his job description to get to know them — for how could he recruit anyone without the bare minimum of having a conversation — but he could never quite bring himself to it. Barty would've been suited better for the role, were it not for his complete lack of subtlety. In all fairness, the sixth-years didn't make it easy either; they were so palpably nervous around Regulus he almost found it comical. Books slipped from their hands in the library, mugs dropped at breakfast, conversations stuttered to a halt whenever he walked into the room. It never failed to make Regulus utterly, incomprehensibly uncomfortable.

He went to a table for a Butterbeer, then carried it over to the sofa by the fire where Miller was perched with Violet and Denise. The two girls all but dissolved into giggles as he approached, disappearing towards the dance floor with side-long glances at him. Regulus suppressed the urge to roll his eyes at the insinuation as he dropped down beside Miller.

"Having fun?" he asked.

She nodded, watching her friends weave off. Regulus followed her gaze, only to find Isa across the room, standing against the wall with a

drink in hand, watching the dancers without joining them.

“It’s a good party,” Miller said. “All very well put together.”

As if summoned, Barty flung himself down onto the sofa beside them while Evan claimed the nearest armchair.

“And for that compliment, Miller, I’ll fetch you a drink,” Barty declared gallantly.

“They’d better not be spiked,” Regulus shot.

Barty theatrically pressed a hand to his chest. “What do you *take* me for, Black?”

“A menace,” Regulus returned flatly.

Miller giggled.

A few moments later, they were joined by Amaryllis and Melania, both of whom made no effort at all to disguise the hostility radiating from them.

“Enjoying yourselves, girls?” Evan asked easily.

“Mm,” Amaryllis nodded. “It’s nice. Everyone seems to be having such fun.”

“Everyone except Isa, of course,” Melania cut in, her glare fixed squarely on Regulus.

He stiffened and was instantly debating whether to retort, but Evan cut him off.

“Don’t, Mel,” he said, the warning in his voice clear.

“What? She’s been down for ages, and now the party’s ruined for her too?” Melania huffed.

“Whatever, Mel,” Evan said wearily. “Let’s keep it civil.”

She only shrugged, looping her arm through Amaryllis’s. Both of them shot Regulus another poisonous look before sweeping across the room to where Isa still lingered at the wall.

Regulus could feel Barty, Evan and Miller watching him, but he ignored them. His eyes stayed fixed on the scene across the floor,

where Amaryllis and Melania leaned in close, coaxing Isa out of her corner until, at last, she let herself be tugged onto the dance floor.

“Don’t worry about it, mate—” Evan began.

“Is she down?” Regulus interrupted.

Evan blinked. “What?”

“Melania said Isa’s been really down lately. Do you think so too?”

Barty and Evan exchanged a glance. Barty gave an awkward little cough — very unlike him — before saying, “Err — well. Yes. She’s not been… as lively as usual.” He looked to Evan, almost for rescue. “Right, mate?”

Evan gave a quiet nod. “Yeah.”

The words landed like a stone in Regulus’s gut. The guilt was immediate and vicious, gnawing through him. He had been so consumed with his own concerns — the Plan, the war, N.E.W.T.s, Quidditch… He’d been so wrapped in his own world that he’d completely forgotten about anyone or anything but himself or his own things. Isa had been down for weeks — so visible that even Barty had taken note, and Regulus had failed to notice…

His best friend, his *fiancé* … They weren’t even married yet, and already Regulus was failing her.

He swallowed hard, bile rising at the back of his throat, and set his Butterbeer carefully onto the table. He rose without a word, acutely aware of his friends’ eyes burning into his back as he crossed the room.

The crowd pressed in, but he managed to steadily make his way to the centre where Isa was swaying listlessly with Amaryllis and Melania. For a brief moment, Isa’s eyes met his across the dancing bodies — and then she turned away pointedly.

Regulus rolled his eyes, but he didn’t give up. He came to an abrupt stop before her.

“Well, owl the Prophet,” Isa said dryly. “Regulus Arcturus Black, voluntarily on the dance floor.”

Regulus wisely refrained from pointing out that very little of his

presence on the dance floor was voluntary.

Thankfully, Amaryllis and Melania had the good sense to go away and leave them alone. Regulus reached for Isa's wrist and tugged gently, pulling her into him. As always, she slotted perfectly into place, her head beneath his chin, his head resting easily on her crown.

They began to sway, slowly, to the music.

"You're angry," Regulus murmured.

Isa said nothing.

"You're sad."

Still no reply.

"You've been sad for some time now."

He felt her body tense against him, the faintest hitch of breath, but she still didn't speak.

Bending his head, his lips brushing close to her ear, he whispered, "Talk to me, Ies."

Her eyes slipped shut and he felt her sigh against his chest. "It's just… the war. It's all a mess. Every day I wonder if I'll see Father again during the holidays, or if this was the last one. And it's all getting worse, and here we are, throwing a party in the common room…"

Regulus let out a long breath, rocking with her gently. He knew how much she worried about her father — and not without reason, too. Mr Nott was always on raids, in duels, at the thick of it. He was a magnificent duellist and something in Regulus refused to see him as anything but indestructible, but the truth was that it would take only one unlucky turn and a few too many opponents, and he'd be gone.

Yet, Regulus had an inkling that this wasn't the whole of it.

He dipped his head again, murmuring, "…and?"

Isa leaned back just enough to meet his gaze, raising her eyebrows. "And what?"

Regulus gave her a small smile. "That's not all, is it?"

Isa closed her eyes briefly, then tucked herself back into his chest.

“No.”

A long silence stretched between them. Regulus registered nothing of the music or the people around them on the dance floor — not their friends watching, not their housemates whispering about the engaged dream couple. There was only Isa, her hair brushing against his chin and the soft mix of vanilla and lavender clinging to her.

Her voice was barely a whisper. “You’re… the only one who’d understand. But you’re also… the hardest to talk to about it.”

His throat went instantly dry. “What do you mean?”

Another silence followed. Isa was clearly struggling to find the words. Then, at last:

“I… I still think about him.”

The words hit him like a physical slap. He knew exactly who she meant. And as if to twist the knife, Davies’s voice echoed in his head.

God, I love you. You know that. How I wish things could be different. How I wish I could grow old with you. Dance with you. Hear you sing. See you laugh every bloody day.

“No matter how hard I try not to,” Isa murmured, “I… still love him.”

Regulus went rigid. His mind spun too fast to form an answer.

It wasn't that he didn’t know. He knew very well that love didn’t just simply… vanish. But they didn’t talk about it. In this fragile, bizarre situation, they always refrained from talking about them, always refrained from naming the ghosts that haunted this arrangement.

Isa drew back a little, her voice almost breaking. “Do you still think about… him?”

He swallowed hard.

All the time.

“Sometimes.”

He pointedly looked past her, not wanting to see all the emotions in her eyes.

She didn’t relent though, her eyes searching his face.

“Do you… still love him?”

He flinched instantly.

Always.

He did not answer. Instead, he lost himself in the silence for a while. It felt like minutes until he opened his eyes and whispered, “It doesn’t matter, Ies. Because… we’re here, and they’re not… It’s just you and me, now.”

Isa’s lips curved into the smallest smile. She nodded. “I know, Reg. And I’m… glad, you know. That it’s you. That it’s you and me.”

He nodded in return, understanding it for what it was — a consolation.

Their eyes caught, then held. They just looked at each other. Regulus saw the flecks of olive in her brown irises, the faint shine of tears she’d been holding back. He could *feel* the intimacy of the moment deeply in his bones, as if by these few words, they’d flayed themselves open to each other. As if, just by acknowledging what was happening, without even really naming it, by just admitting they understood — they’d stripped each other bare.

Gently, Regulus lifted a stray lock of gold from her cheek, tucking it behind her ear, his fingers brushing her skin. He saw the flicker in her eyes — saw how she glanced down to his lips, then back up to his grey eyes.

He felt his heart hammering in his chest. He was suddenly acutely aware of everything: the light catching in her hair, her soft hands sliding to his neck, the faint vanilla scent of her skin, the nervous lick of her lips as she parted them.

So close. They were *so* close.

No. They couldn’t do this. They shouldn't do this.

He dropped his eyes, breaking the connection.

He felt her reaction to the rejection at once — the stiffening, the way she buried her face against his chest so no one could see. So no one could see the tears spilling hot onto his robes. Regulus saw it, though. He saw the tears wetting his robes, felt her shoulders tremble against him, and heard all the tiny, broken apologies falling from her lips.

He pulled her closer. Despite the fact they'd made a very clear agreement — that he wouldn't touch her before their wedding night — he knew Isa was sad, knew that she was lonely. He felt the guilt gnawing savagely at him, and he tried to force it down as he bent his head over her, shushing her repeatedly.

"Ssh," he whispered, over and over, his voice ragged against her hair. "Ssh, it's alright, Ies. It's alright."

*****

Halloween came quickly. Regulus knew that the feast in the Great Hall promised much-needed reprieve for many students. Although, as students at Hogwarts, they were relatively safe, even within the walls there was no real escaping. With the war raging outside, and especially after the Dementor attack, many students were already pulled from Hogwarts, and every week the girls were whispering about rumours about who might be withdrawn next.

The atmosphere was bleak, with a lot of distrust towards both the Slytherins — the supposed bloodpurist terrorists — and the Gryffindors — the supposed anarchist modernists. Of course the hostility between these two was the greatest. The most miserable moment of the day was always breakfast, where students sat in tense silence, waiting for the owls carrying bad news about their loved ones.

In this light, students desperately looked forward to a night of food and laughter. Regulus felt relieved, too, though not for the feast, but for the fact that the weekend marked the first Hogsmeade visit of the year, and thus his very first meet-up with Dorcas since term had begun.

Leaving wasn't all that easy, though. Due to new, tight security measures, one couldn't just Apparate in and out of Hogsmeade wherever they pleased. There was now a special designated Apparition point, which meant leaving or arriving secretly had become almost impossible. The rules had sparked much backlash in the country — privacy concerns, apparently — so movement wasn't officially monitored or registered, but Regulus was still set on casting a Desillusionment Charm before making his way to the Apparition point.

He and Dorcas had agreed on a Muggle pub — a different one this time, as always, to avoid attracting attention — in London at ten. It

was a touch early, especially as he'd had to drag Barty and Evan from bed and persuade them to walk with him down to the village. He couldn't risk going alone into Hogsmeade, after all.

Predictably, Barty had complained all the way.

"Oh, fuck you, Black," Barty groaned as Regulus steered them towards Tomes and Scrolls. "If you're just going to drool over dusty books, why in Merlin's name did we have to get up before noon?"

Evan smirked, clapping Barty on the shoulder. "Come on, B. We'll grab a drink at the Three Broomsticks while His Majesty browses."

"A date with Rosier," Barty snorted. "That already sounds better."

Regulus watched them go, Barty slinging an arm across Evan's shoulders as they disappeared into the crowd. He was too tired and stressed to fully register something twisting faintly in his chest at the sight of his friends.

If he'd had arranged to meet Dorcas in the afternoon, he would've felt more energetic for sure, but Regulus needed to make the most of the day.

And boy, would he.

*****

"I ordered you coffee this time. The beer didn't seem to do you many favours last time," Dorcas smirked by way of greeting.

Regulus threw her a small smile and settled down across from her, feeling very uncomfortable under her watchful eyes. There was something observant about her that made his skin prickle. And at the same time, there was something considerate about her which made him feel at ease quicker than he'd expected.

"So, how's Hogwarts?" she asked.

Regulus shrugged. "It's alright. Heavy workload, I suppose…"

"Yes, N.E.W.T. year is no joke," Dorcas said with a grin. "What subjects are you taking?"

He cleared his throat.

“Well,” he began, shifting in his chair, “a fair few, actually.”

They launched into his timetable, Dorcas comparing his subjects with her own experience. Like him, she’d taken more than the average for N.E.W.T.s, but when he listed his out, her incredulous laugh said that at least she hadn’t been mad enough to attempt twelve.

“To be honest, I think you Blacks are completely mental.”

“My brother didn’t take that many subjects,” Regulus countered.

“True, but your nieces definitely did.”

“You know my nieces?”

“I remember Narcissa — and a bit of Bellatrix — from Hogwarts. Andromeda I never met at school, but there was always talk about the brilliant Black sisters.”

Regulus nodded faintly. Of course. All those years of tutoring, the generations of knowledge at their fingertips — there wasn’t a Black alive who wasn’t expected to be a genius.

They talked about Hogwarts for a while until Regulus felt the air shift, and Dorcas cleared her throat.

“So, anything new under the sun?” she asked.

He sighed, his tone instinctively dropping.

“Well… there’s been talk about a new… big attack.”

Dorcas nodded, face set and serious. “Yes, we’d guessed as much. To be honest, we’re surprised it’s taking this long. Only small raids since the Dementor attack — it feels like the calm before the storm. Do you know what they’re planning?”

Regulus felt utterly useless as he shook his head. “No. I only know they won’t attack Hogwarts.”

“How gracious,” Dorcas muttered dryly. “That leaves all the big places still — Diagon Alley, St Mungo’s…”

“Or the Ministry,” Regulus added quietly.

“You think?”

Regulus shrugged. They hadn't discussed anything concrete at the last meeting, so he technically had nothing to go on, but well… it made sense. The Ministry had become one the Revolution's biggest foes — so why not attack it?

"I honestly don't know," he admitted. "But it would fit. After Hogwarts, Diagon Alley feels… almost like a step down, doesn't it? They'll want something bigger. More impact. And what's bigger than the Ministry?"

Dorcas let out a shuddering sigh. "That's going to be so fucking messy."

They carried on for a long while, turning over scenarios, Dorcas pressing him with question after question about his role in the Revolution and all the little details she somehow managed to drag from him. They were heavy topics, shameful ones too — and at last, he forced himself to cut it short. He really *did* need to leave sooner rather than later.

"Look, Dorcas," he said. "I really need to go. I don't have anything more, but… if I do before Christmas, I'll contact you."

Dorcas nodded, rising as he did. "Why the rush? Don't you have the whole day in Hogsmeade?"

"Yes," Regulus admitted, and he had to brace himself a bit to be able to sell the lie that was going to roll off his tongue next. "But my friends think I'm just roaming bookshops, and they can't find out I left the village…"

"Alright," Dorcas said simply. "Let's get going, then."

They moved towards the door, but before they could leave the café, Regulus turned abruptly.

"How… is he?"

Dorcas froze, just for a beat, then gave a small smile, knowing exactly who he meant. "He's alright. He's smart, quick — a good dueller. He holds his own."

Regulus nodded, knowing this. He swallowed before his next question.

"And… his friends?"

A brief silence followed. Dorcas tilted her head, visibly weighing the question.

“I mean,” Regulus said quickly, his throat tight. “I know Sirius. If something happened to one of his friends… he’d never recover from it.”

Dorcas’s eyes narrowed just slightly. Regulus saw the suspicion flicker in them. “By friends, you mean…”

Regulus forced a shrug, trying to look indifferent even as heat crept up his face. “Like… Lupin, or Pettigrew, or—” He stumbled, then forced it out, low, “—Ja—Potter.”

Another silence.

If Dorcas saw through him, she gave no sign.

“They’re all fine,” she said at last. “We’ve suffered losses, yes, but none fresh out of Hogwarts, thankfully.”

Regulus nodded, clearing his throat. “Alright. Thank you.”

And with that, he turned sharply and walked out — onwards to his next destination.

*****

His new destination was the village of Little Hangleton. He’d never heard of it until a few months ago, when he’d discovered in some dusty genealogy that the Gaunts had once lived there. There was no real reason to visit — the Gaunts had long since died out — but Regulus had reached the painful conclusion that he had so little to go on, he might as well chase the scraps he did have. Little Hangleton was one of the few tangible threads linking the Dark Lord to his past, and Regulus reasoned it was better to do *something* than sit stewing in his own ignorance.

That ‘doing something’ turned out to be a great deal of aimless wandering around a village that seemed thoroughly unremarkable. He had changed into Muggle clothes before meeting Dorcas, but he still felt he drew too much attention in a place where strangers were clearly uncommon. There was a pub — the Hanged Man — and Regulus suspected that would be the quickest way to pick up talk of the Dark Lord’s heritage, but it was also the quickest way to set off alarm bells if he said the wrong thing to the wrong person.

So he drifted along cobbled lanes and hedgerows until, without quite meaning to, he found himself in the churchyard. Moss and ivy crept up leaning headstones and the ground uneven beneath his boots. He was halfway down a row of crooked headstones when he stopped dead.

Tom Riddle.

The letters carved into the stone seemed to leap at him. The Dark Lord's father.

Here lay the bones of the father of the man leading the Revolution.

Regulus's heart began to hammer in his chest as he stared at the name, the ground tilting beneath him. He could physically feel the magnitude of the situation, the sensation pinning him to the ground.

He was still frozen there when a deep voice sounded behind him.

"Looking for something?"

Regulus let out a distinctly undignified sound as he spun around, heart leaping into his throat. He came face to face with a broad-shouldered Muggle. Regulus forced down the shock and quickly composed himself.

"Oh — hello, sir. I was just… walking about."

It then occurred to him that wandering aimlessly in a graveyard was *hardly* ordinary behaviour. This was very much underscored by the man's raised eyebrows.

"Well, look," Regulus hurried on, trying to sound as casual as possible. "I've some very distant relatives who lived here. I was just tracing a bit of family history."

That seemed to ease the Muggle, whose eyes were less suspicious now. "What name?"

"The Gaunt family," Regulus said.

Which was, apparently, absolutely the wrong thing to say, as the man's expression hardened at once. His eyes narrowed and his body stiffened with a hostility that Regulus could actually feel.

Regulus back-pedalled quickly. "I mean — very distant. *Far* removed. I only wondered, they did live here, didn't they?"

The man studied him for a long moment before nodding slowly. “Aye. They did.”

“Could you show me where?” Regulus asked carefully.

The man gave a visible shudder. “Show you the Gaunt place? You don’t want to be pokin’ about there, lad. Nothin’ but rats and broken bottles. But — if you’re set on it, I can give you directions.”

“Yes, please,” Regulus said at once.

The man lifted a hand, pointing past the churchyard. “Take that lane toward the woods. When you reach the stream, follow it down till you find an old hedgerow and what’s left of a stone wall. Shack’s half-hidden in the trees. Roof’s likely caved in by now — you won’t miss it.”

“Thank you, sir. Truly.”

As Regulus turned to leave, the man called after him. “Be careful, lad. Place is said to be haunted.”

*****

Regulus definitely understood why people whispered the place was haunted. And he’d chosen Halloween to come here, of all days.

He admitted that he hadn’t thought it through as well as he’d hoped.

The shack was hunched and clearly rotting into the ground. Like the man had said, the roof was sagging, and Regulus heard the door creak harshly when he had mustered the courage to step inside.

And once inside, he instantly felt something was wrong.

He couldn’t place it at first — only that his skin prickled as though icy fingers brushed along it, that his throat constricted, that heat and cold warred through his veins at once. His pulse pounded in his ears as the very air seemed to press him down.

Everything about this place felt wrong, wrong, *wrong*. He should not be here. He had to get out.

The feeling made him stagger and he had to catch himself against the warped doorframe. He forced himself to look around, to really take in the surroundings, just to distract himself from the feeling of utter panic that was flooding through him.

Out. Out. *Out.*

The place was a ruin. The stench of rot made him gag. The fireplace was blackened with soot, and deep scratches scored the walls where plaster had peeled away.

He forced his eyes to wander across the room longer, just to dull the nausea that was mastering him, when suddenly it struck like a blow.

Dark magic.

He was feeling dark magic.

The shack was steeped in it, so full of it that Regulus's body itself rebelled against it. He'd read that Dark Magic left traces, that some could sense it — but this… This was so visceral…. There was something truly, incomprehensibly dark and twisted in the very fabric of the place.

Well, yes, of course it was. The Gaunts had lived here. Every scrap he'd read about them reeked of cruelty — violent, abusive, obsessed with their bloodline. They'd done humanity a favour by squandering their strength through inbreeding. And well, the Dark Lord came from here. His heritage, his inheritance was carved into the very walls of this place. No wonder the place was tainted with darkness.

Regulus again forced himself to look around, to ignore all the parts of him that screamed, that *begged* for him to run, to leave this place and never come back.

And then, all of a sudden, something caught his eyes.

In the centre of the room, on a rickety table, lay a ring.

He moved closer, and with each step his throat tightened further, his heart hammering harder, until it was all he could do to breathe.

And then the thought hit him, snapping every puzzle piece into place.

No.

No fucking way.

Could it? *Could it*?

The air tore from his lungs in a gasp, both from the sudden lack of oxygen and the revelation itself.

It was unthinkable. Months and months of research, never having seen one with his own eyes, having no clue what exactly he was looking for other than the inspiration they were drawn from… Un-fucking-thinkable.

And yet, Regulus knew. Knew in the pit of his bones. Knew in the depth of his soul that he was currently standing in front of a Horcrux.

For a moment he froze entirely, his mind suddenly choked with all of it — fear, anticipation, adrenaline, dread, excitement, horror.

He couldn't lose it.

This was too important. He couldn't allow himself to falter. He had to hold himself together — to think, to come up with a plan.

Alright. He'd prepared for this. He'd imagined it over and over, endlessly — all kinds of scenarios, all kinds of ways to find the Horcruxes and, more importantly, destroy them.

One of the most important things he'd come to learn from the library in Fez was that a Horcrux was among the strongest enchantments known to the world, thus nearly indestructible. And only magic more destructive than the act itself could unmake it.

Which left, for him, only one option.

Fiendfyre.

Unfortunately, Fiendfyre was as uncontrollable as it was powerful. Regulus was confident he could conjure it — and if he chose the right place, he wouldn't even need to contain it. In the worst case, Curse Control could sweep in and cover the damage. As long as the Horcruxes were destroyed and nothing pointed back to him, it would be worth it.

The problem was that he could hardly do this four times without Aurors or Curse Control tearing the country apart in search of the maniac setting landscapes ablaze. Worse, it might draw the Dark Lord's attention. And everything had to remain invisible.

So, he'd been forced to admit the truth early on: there was only one way. He would have to collect the Horcruxes and destroy them all together — simple as that.

Except, of course, it wasn't simple at all.

First of all, it meant he'd have to *take* the Horcruxes. He'd have to navigate layers of wards and curses just to move one without killing himself in the process. Secondly, he would need to store them somewhere absolutely secure, somewhere no one would ever stumble across them. And third — most important of all — the Dark Lord could never know they'd been touched.

Which meant that Regulus had to duplicate the Horcrux, and replicate every protective ward and snarl of Dark magic the original bore, so that nothing would betray it had been taken.

In other words, the Gaunt shack had to feel as steeped in darkness without the Horcrux as it had with a fragment of the Dark Lord's soul rotting inside it.

Alright. He could do this. He'd come too far not to.

There were still a couple of hours left before he'd have to get back to Hogwarts. He'd done all the research, had surged all the libraries he could think of and had, not so surprisingly, found most about the wars and protective magic in Magnus Nott's library. Regulus had seen the man's work at Hohenhain, and now he had learned from the man's library himself.

So he set to work.

For hours, he wove spell after spell, sweat soaking his collar, his wand-hand cramping with effort. He layered wards, bent curses back upon themselves, coaxed decoys into place. At last, wearing dragonhide gloves, he lifted the ring. Even through the thick leather he felt it — the crawling, oppressive feeling of the thing. It made his chest instantly constrict and his stomach churn. Darkness clung to it like a living thing.

Still, he did it. He replaced the Horcrux with its double and he rebuilt the layers of wards until the shack felt as suffocating and dark as it had felt before.

By the end of it he was shaking, completely drained, his skin clammy with sweat and his mind so raw with fatigue he thought he'd crash on the spot.

But it was done. He had *done* it.

Regulus exhaled a long, ragged breath. Then, with the ring locked safely away, he turned on the spot and Disapparated.

When he reappeared, he stood before a place he had not looked at in years. A place he'd sworn never to return to. And for the very first time in his life, he was too tired — too emptied of everything, too drained of emotion — to feel anything at all as he looked at it.

Seacliff Hall.

Chapter End Notes

I PROMISE you there'll be a supermarket scene. But this was already 7000 words and it felt like a natural moment to end it.

Alsooo, one Horcrux down!
Reg-voldy: 1-0z

I hope to update on Monday (NOT the upcoming one, the one after).

Lots of love, as always, xx

Chapter 8: Of Hauls & Attacks

Chapter Notes

Hiii everyone!

A few days later than planned, but I come bearing gifts: a brand-new 7.5k chapter! 🎉 I had so much fun writing this one and I really hope you enjoy reading it as much as I did putting it together. Thank you so, so much for all your wonderful comments — they honestly mean the world and keep me super motivated. You guys are the best.

Right now, I'm tentatively aiming for Monday (in about ten days) for the next update. It looks like I might have accidentally stumbled into a rhythm of posting every 10 days — which works out to about three chapters a month. Not quite as much as I'd originally dreamed of, but well... it is what it is.

As always, lots of love, xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Regulus had managed to find a piece of the Dark Lord's *soul* — the most powerful wizard of their time, the leader of the Revolution, more and more feared by the general people, the one steering the course of history itself. Regulus had never stumbled upon magic so dark, so corrupted — and that was saying something, given the family he was born and raised in and their particular taste for everything dark and twisted.

Then, he'd spent hours dismantling all the protections around it and re-casting them upon a duplicate, giving him a glimpse into what the bone-deep exhaustion of flying the world's longest Quidditch match must feel like. And then he had *taken* — physically taken — that piece of the Dark Lord's soul to Seacliff Hall, the house of his sickest nightmares, the house where years of abuse had taken place.

And then, somehow, in the same hour, he found himself standing in front of an orange-and-white sign above the doors of something called *Sainsbury's*.

Life *really* had a way of giving him whiplash.

Although he was definitely running late, Regulus had chosen not to

return to Hogsmeade straightaway. He needed distance from what had just happened, needed to steer his thoughts far away from split souls and dark wizards and the very likely chance of meeting a quick death.

So, once again he had sought solace in the Muggle world, though this time with a clear purpose. He had Apparated to a shopping precinct in Manchester. He could not risk the chance of running into anyone he knew, and somehow exactly that had happened on numerous occasions in London — James in Marie-Anne's bookshop, Evans in Marie-Anne's car, half of Gryffindor's former seventh-years when he was simply crossing a street….

No. Surely London was cursed, so he was not taking the risk. This time, he went to Manchester.

Of course, he used to come here a lot, with Black Manor nearby. It was impossible not to think of Sirius as he passed through the centre, impossible not to think of all the times they'd split ways — Regulus drifting toward some bookshop while Sirius went to a record shop to gawk at musicians Regulus now knew were called the Rolling Stones or Bowie.

Back then, he'd just seen their difference in it. Now, thinking back of him and Sirius, both walking in Muggle London, all he could see was their resemblance.

The memory dried his throat.

"Sorry, love, are you going in or not?"

A woman in a knee-length skirt and patterned blouse hurried past, a knitted shopping bag over her shoulder, two children clutching at her legs. Regulus startled and felt his cheeks burn.

"Sorry, madam," he muttered, then followed them inside.

Inside, Regulus instantly came to the realisation that Miller had done an exquisite job at describing a supermarket. From the harsh fluorescent lights, that mixed scent of fresh bread, fish and disinfectant, the feel of linoleum floors as he moved across them… And then the endless rows of boxes, of tins and packets — all of it was exactly as she had told him, and all of it made him absolutely gawp.

It was just so… oddly organised in its chaos.

His gaping did not cease as he passed aisles stacked with what apparently was tinned Heinz soup, custard powder or Penguin biscuits. He let different packets of crisps go through his hands, one taste more bizarre than the next — smoky bacon, cheese and onion…

He tried not to stare as he passed the freezers, where two women gossiped about a neighbour's son being caught up in some riot in the city. Absentmindedly, he drifted toward the cheese counter, where a man ordered something called a wedge of mature cheddar. Regulus, too intrigued by the notion of Muggle cheese, found the boldness to ask for the same.

From there he just simply wandered, his eyes following aisle after aisle. He felt oddly lost, seeing no logic at all in a place where flour, biscuits and tinned peas were stacked side by side.

But then he saw it — saw what he had come for. An entire cardboard display of *Double Dips*.

Yes.

There were bright orange and red packets, different flavours of what Miller had called sherbet powders… complete with sticks for dipping.

Against himself, he smirked, and then he set to work.

Fifteen minutes, far too much package-reading and a number of jealous children eying his trolley in awe later, Regulus considered his job done. He wheeled his cart towards the tills, faintly aware of the stares that followed him. Children absolutely gawped at the mountain of sweets he'd collected, whereas women laughed quietly as they passed, clearly amused by the young man with a trolley overflowing with Double Dips, Opal Fruits, Bazooka Joe gum and an alarming variety of chocolate and crisps with the strangest names and flavours.

To be frank, Regulus was way too pleased with his haul to care about anything or anyone, just relishing his little bubble of triumph.

Unfortunately, that bubble came to a very sudden and violent burst just a yard before the till, when he looked up and found himself face-to-face with a very familiar head of red hair.

Fuck.

He groaned.

Which was, in hindsight, not the best course of action, for it only did the one thing he didn't want — drawing her attention.

Evans whipped around, her expression shifting from shocked to suspicious to utterly baffled. all slowly enough for Regulus to follow each stage in real time.

A silence followed, and then Evans, visibly confused down to her bones, demanded, "Are you *kidding* me?"

Regulus became suddenly, painfully aware of his feet, shifting awkwardly on the linoleum, standing in a Muggle supermarket in front of the Muggleborn former Head Girl and very much Marauder-befriended Lily Evans.

So much for not running into anyone in bloody Manchester.

And why was it always *her?*

Apparently, Evans was wondering the same thing.

"Are you following me or something?" she pressed.

Regulus arched an eyebrow, let out a huff, then countered, "Are *you* following me?"

"Well… no," she said.

"Me neither," he replied, stiffly.

A very awkward silence stretched. Her eyes felt as if they were boring into him. He felt a strange, desperate urge either to bolt or to conform to social norms and make… small talk.

He honestly had no idea which one would be more mortifying.

His brain and mouth were definitely not cooperating, because before he could properly think it through, the words slipped from his mouth.

"So… what are you doing… here?"

Evans's expression softened slightly — a strange mix of flustered, intrigued and hesitant. "My sister's fiancé lives here."

Regulus nodded stiffly, wondering how the hell he was supposed to respond. Small talk was not his strong suit at the best of times, and talking to Lily Evans about her Muggle family in a Manchester

supermarket was frankly too much for his brain to compute.

"…And you? Aren't you supposed to be at Hogwarts?" she asked.

"I am," he said.

She nodded in the same stiff way.

Somehow, he felt the very foreign urge to keep the conversation going.

"My house is nearby," he offered.

"Isn't your house in London?" she asked, raising her eyebrows.

"That's… another one," he muttered.

She huffed a laugh. "Well, of course."

Another pause followed — which gave Evans the chance to let her eyes drift to his trolley. They roved from the mountain of Double Dips to the Bazooka Joe gum, over the chocolates, to the crisps, and then back to his face.

At which point she burst out laughing.

She tried to stifle it, cleared her throat once or twice, but clearly there was something so utterly absurd about Regulus Black in a Muggle supermarket with a trolley piled high with children's sweets that she just dissolved into laughter again, and again, all in helpless fits.

Regulus, meanwhile, had absolutely no idea how to cope with it, so he just stood there, utterly baffled and deeply uncomfortable.

"So—" she managed at last, coughing to regain composure, "you… have a thing for… Double Dips?"

Even if Regulus had known how to dignify that, he never got the chance, because another voice cut in.

"Oh," said a sharp, clipped tone. "Who are *you*?"

A tall, thin woman had joined them, her blonde hair perfectly set, her mouth pursed tight. Her cold eyes raked over him slowly in a way that would've made Mother proud. Then she tilted her head. "Oh… you're one of them, aren't you?"

Regulus knew exactly what she meant.

“Yes,” he said stiffly. “And you’re one of them.”

“This is my sister, Petunia,” Lily muttered, now a bit flustered.

Regulus instantly thought just how terrible a choice of name that was for the woman standing in front of him. Petunias were far too pretty for someone so visibly sour. His mind went to flowers that would do the woman justice — like something with thorns — before being distracted by the sheer irony that the Evans parents, both Muggles, had accidentally followed the very pureblood tradition of naming daughters after flowers.

An inevitable laugh escaped him.

Which did absolutely nothing for his standing with Evans’s sister, who was now looking at him as though he were something she’d scrape off her shoe.

Her gaze flicked to his trolley. Then back to him.

Her mouth actually fell open.

“I… have a party,” he said flatly.

Evans was clearly at the end of her rope trying not to laugh again, while her sister looked both appalled and faintly afraid.

Regulus managed nothing but hovering awkwardly, pondering why, for the love of *everything*, life kept screwing with him like this.

“…a children’s party,” he added, stiffly.

That clearly did it — Evans broke. She dissolved into laughter again, completely helpless, in striking contrast to her sister, who looked at the situation with a wrinkled nose.

“Al…right,” the sister said, clipped and sharp. “Lily, I’m going to fetch a tin of beans.”

Regulus eyed her as she stalked away, very stiff-backed, and then turned back to Evans.

“So…,” he nodded awkwardly. “That’s your sister.”

Evans wiped a tear from her eye, still smirking. “Yes.”

Regulus nodded again and decided that this conversation — and this entire moment — was definitely over. With a curt little gesture, he turned towards the till, but just before joining the queue, he heard her voice call out.

“Look — Black — Regulus—”

He turned back.

Evans was watching him, her mouth opening and closing a few times before she apparently found the courage to say what was on her mind.

“He talks about you, you know.”

Her laughter was gone now. Instead, her expression was grave and serious, though there was also a… curious glint to it.

Regulus was too flabbergasted to say anything. His throat went instantly dry at the mention of his brother. Yes, he’d discussed Sirius shortly with Dorcas, but that had been premeditated, at *his* request. Running into Lily Evans and hearing her bring him up unprompted was nowhere on his list of expectations for today.

He just stared at her while she stepped a little closer.

Her voice dropped. “I think he feels like he… shouldn’t… talk about you. I don’t think he mentions you to anyone else. Just — sometimes — with me.”

“How is he?” Regulus found himself asking, the words scraping out before he could stop them. Dorcas had technically already told him that Sirius was alright, but surely Evans was closer to Sirius, so she’d have more to share.

“He’s… good,” she said softly, giving him a private, wry little smile. “Like you’ll remember him, I suppose. Always joking, always keeping everyone’s spirits up.”

Her tone lowered further, careful, strangely weighted. “It must be hard… caring for someone you’re allegedly not supposed to.”

An involuntary and hollow huff escaped him. Hard was really an understatement. He saw Evans’s sister returning from the corner of his eyes and remembered the few things that Evans had once told him about her.

“Well, you’d know,” he said. “Siblings and all that.”

He looked at her — properly looked. There was something alluring about her, and suddenly it made so much sense that she’d always been the subject of Slytherin talk, reduced to some Mudblood equivalent of Medusa. It was strikingly easy to both feel enamoured and threatened by her, though not in any obvious way, but in that subtle, insidious way that crept up on you, until you suddenly felt it in your gut.

He was positive it was the eyes.

He’d always known Evans’s eyes were green, but up close he was struck again by just how startling they were — sharp and clear as glass, and yet warm, too. They suited her. Somehow *everything* about her suited her, from the flaming red hair and the wry smile to the bite in her voice when she clearly felt agitated.

For a moment, he let himself admire it — that clash of red and green that somehow worked, contrasting and harmonious all at once.

And then he noticed her shifted gaze, laced with something piercing and wry. It cut straight to him and set him on edge — which was, as he’d understand quickly, a clear warning for what was about to come.

“I’m not talking about your brother.”

It took him a second to register what she meant.

And then his eyes shot open at once. He froze.

No.

She hadn’t been talking about Sirius at all. She had been talking about James.

It must be hard… caring for someone you’re allegedly not supposed to.

Did she know?

She must — why else would James Potter ever bring up Regulus Black?

Oh, James — beautiful, maddening James — who must feel torn apart, forced himself to bury his love for Regulus and the subsequent betrayal of his best friend, and the desperate need to let it out, to share it with someone. Because that was James — full in his emotions, so genuine and eager in his love. And obviously, there was no room

for that in their Marauder club.

Regulus had no idea whether Evans truly knew the nature of James's urge to speak about his best friend's brother. He doubted James had told her outright — but she must have sensed it, right?

Regulus decided not to show her, though, just how thrown off guard he was, or how only the mention of James made his throat so unbearably dry.

And he wondered — did she even understand how privileged she was? That she got to sit with him, *talk* to him, be part of his life? Not like Regulus, in his dreams or his fantasies or his memories — but in real life, in flesh and bone… Did she understand? Did she *feel* just how special that was? To be the one to be confided in by James Potter? To be the one to hear him laugh, to see him smirk?

The thought made his heart ache so violently he thought it might burn its way out of his chest.

So, he forced himself to do the only thing he could do to keep himself sane. He schooled his features and broke the stare.

Then he nodded as though it all meant nothing, as though he wasn't absolutely breaking down on the inside.

"Evening, Evans."

*****

Regulus couldn't get out of Manchester soon enough. First and foremost because of Evans and her prying insinuations and wry eyes, and secondly because he actually really did need to get back to Hogsmeade before someone noticed his absence.

Luckily, he made it back to Hogwarts just in time, and though the scramble had been chaotic and stressful, it came with one advantage too: between the unnerving run-in with Evans and the rush to get back, there literally had been no opportunity to linger on the terrifying fact that he had just stolen a piece of the Dark Lord's *soul*, nor on the fact that the Plan had, for the first time, become something tangible. By managing to get one Horcrux, Regulus was suddenly confronted with a certain feasibility of the Plan, and, by extension, the feasibility of a quick death if the wrong people found out.

Thank Merlin, then, for the trivial distraction of Halloween feasts in

the Great Hall.

“Where have you been?” Evan hissed the moment Regulus slipped into his seat.

Regulus gave a faint shrug, keeping his voice even. “Sorry. Dozed off in the bookshop.” His tone turned dry. “Thanks for not waking me — I was almost late.”

Evan and Barty exchanged very bewildered gazes and Regulus was glad they didn’t press the issue. He did catch Isa’s narrowed eyes, but he quickly steered his gaze away — just to land on the Staff Table. His gaze collided with Professor Hoffman’s and Regulus instantly registered the same suspicious look in it. He swallowed and forced himself to look as normal and indifferent as possible before he firmly turned back to the food on his plate.

The feast itself was fine. People chattered excitedly, the House Elves had prepared some exquisite lamb, and the puddings were bigger and richer than ever. Yet, Regulus could hardly register any of it, as his mind veered again and again to the day’s events. To the town of Little Hangleton, to the Riddle grave, to the Gaunt shack. To the ring, to Seacliff Hall…. He shuddered. This all while he knew he had to feign normalcy, as he was seated across from Isa with her annoying perceptive gaze, and all the time felt Hoffman’s eyes burning in his back. He had no idea whether they actually were — as he was too afraid to check — but the effect was the same.

All in all, he was glad when the feast finally ended.

His relief was short-lived, though, because he was only a few minutes back in the common room when he realised he’d missed the memo that Barty and Evan had arranged a small gathering with the sixth-years. This gathering, of course, included a lot of drinks, chatter and giggling — all things Regulus felt momentarily allergic to.

“Should we get the wireless, Barty?” one of the girls asked, topping off her annoyingly high voice with an even more annoyingly high giggle.

Regulus winced. He exchanged a dark look with Isa. He could not handle this tonight. Isa was quickly swept into a conversation with Melania and Amaryllis, so he realised he was left to his own devices. He let his gaze drift about the room. Two teammates were playing chess, there was an annoying group of fourth-years playing Exploding Snap, and there, at the far end of the room, was Miller, sitting with her two friends.

Regulus's hand brushed against his extendable pockets, and the decision practically made itself.

He rose, leaned toward Isa and murmured, "Need to grab something from the dorm. See you in a bit."

He did not, of course, go to the dorm. Instead, he crossed the common room. Miller caught his eyes halfway and Regulus promptly tipped his head toward the exit. She blinked but apparently got the message, because she excused herself from her friends and fell into step behind him.

"Abducting me out of the common room at this hour, Cap?" she grinned as they slipped into the corridor.

Regulus snorted. "I've got something special, Miller."

Her brows rose, eyes flicking around the dungeons as they walked. "And it's… where exactly?"

"In my pockets, actually. But I know just the place to give it to you."

Ten minutes later, they were in the familiar Charms classroom. He was glad to realise that it looked the same, and that neither Filch nor any of the teachers had removed the pouffes and cushions scattered about the room.

Miller shifted on her feet, curious but also slightly wary.

"So… what's this all about, Cap?"

Regulus slipped his hands into his pockets and instantly forgot about all that had happened that day except for the things stuffed there. With a mischievous smirk that would've made James and Sirius incredibly proud, he pulled out two vibrantly coloured boxes.

Miller's jaw nearly dropped. "Are those… Double Dips?"

Regulus grinned. "I say the match is on, Miller. Fizzing Whizzbees versus Double Dips." He held both packages aloft with grandeur. "May the best snack win."

*****

Unfortunately, Miller had been right, and so the Muggle Double Dips were named champions of the snack tournament — which was saying something, considering Whizzbees came with the added bonus of

lifting you half a foot off the ground. Double Dips had to rely on flavour alone, and still managed to win.

Regulus and Miller spent nearly two hours eating their way through part of the haul, Miller recounting one Muggle childhood anecdote after another. By the end of it, Regulus felt queasy and a little shaky. He'd definitely had too much sugar, very much underscored by the sheer amount of opened packages scattered around them. Sherbet Fountains, Black Jacks, Curly Wurlys, Monster Munch — he'd tasted all of it, and was now paying the price. Obviously, they also ended up missing curfew entirely, and had to sneak their way back into the dungeons.

Perhaps it was the atrocious amount of sugar, or just the easygoing nature of Miller, but on their way back, Regulus felt lighter than he'd thought possible after such a day. This came to a brutal end when Miller laughed about Regulus's sneaking-about skills and his knowledge of secret routes throughout the castle, which made him think of James and all the sneaking-about *they* had done together, and how he'd learnt most about the castle from *him* and, well, it ended up making him somehow, suddenly, very sad.

That drowsy sadness continued the next day. The weather was absolutely foul, with rain hammering against the castle windows, which meant everyone packed themselves into the common room. Regulus escaped to the library for most of the morning, chipping away at homework, but by the time lunch was over he felt tired, hollow. No matter how much he read, or how many inches he wrote, Evans's words played in his head as a taunting mantra, and every time his throat dried.

I think he feels like he… shouldn't… talk about you. I don't think he mentions you to anyone else. Just — sometimes — with me.

Walking back down from the library to the dungeons, it was Isa who broke the silence and pulled Regulus's mind from another round of Evans's voice.

"You alright, Reg?" she asked.

He threw her a smile without thinking. "Yeah, fine, Ies."

When they stepped into the crowded common room, he caught her look which told him that she didn't believe him for a second. And something about that warmed him — the knowledge that, no matter what happened, Isa always looked out for him, searched for him, tried

for him. Even when *he* forgot to, and even now, when he'd so clearly been negligent with her.

A terrific idea struck him.

"Come with me," he said, bluntly. "To the dorm. I've got a surprise."

Isa arched a sceptical brow, but followed him upstairs all the same. Once inside, Regulus realised the dorm was blissfully empty, and he motioned towards his bed. Isa's eyes flicked to the perfectly made bed, the curtains drawn neatly back — and her scepticism shifted into something closer to concern.

"You have a surprise for me… here?"

He nodded. "You'll see in a bit."

She clearly didn't understand, but nonetheless kicked off her shoes and tugged loose her stiff tie. She shrugged out of the heavy wool jumper. All the while, Regulus smirked like he was about to reveal some wicked, naughty secret, as he pulled his own shoes off too. He loosened his collar and tie, then climbed in beside Isa, drawing the bedcurtains closed.

For a moment, there was silence, with just the two of them on his bed, shoulder to shoulder. The tension all but radiated off Isa. He could almost hear her thoughts whirring — what in Merlin's name could Regulus possibly want to show her, here of all places, in the middle of the day, in his bed with his curtains closed? Regulus pointedly ignored the flood of memories he had of Isa in this very bed.

Isa had just opened her mouth — most likely to demand what the hell they were doing — when Regulus leaned across her and pulled open his nightstand drawer. From it, he pulled out an alarmingly large stash of sweets.

It took a second for Isa's brain to catch up, and then her eyes widened. Her gaze flicked from the pile back to Regulus.

"...Reg," she breathed. "Are those… Muggle sweets?"

He caught the gleam in her eyes at once and nodded solemnly. "And crisps!" he declared, holding aloft a bag of cheese and onion.

Isa looked utterly dumbfounded. "You," she almost hissed, "you… you've been to a Muggle market-supper-thingy?"

“Supermarket,” he corrected swiftly.

“Oh.” She gasped, eyes wide. “Tell me *everything*.”

And so he did.

*****

“Oh, this… this is so good, Reg,” Isa exclaimed with an incredulous laugh. She threw her head back in another theatrical groan.

“I know, right,” Regulus said proudly, sitting cross-legged beside her, a little sherbet dust clinging to his jumper.

Isa dipped the stick back into the packet and licked it slowly, eyes fluttering shut in absolute rapture. Then came the noise — a low, drawn-out moan that started deep in her throat and spilled obscenely into the silence of the dormitory, ending on a little shiver as she half-laughed through it. “Oooh, this is *so* good, Reg.”

Regulus had a hard time not bursting out laughing and felt ridiculously pleased by her reaction. She dipped the sherbet stick back into the Double Dip packet, licking off the powder with relish, lips pursed, tongue darting to the corners of her mouth. She made a performance of it, too — smacking her lips, humming like she was tasting some very fine wine.

Amused, Regulus reached for another snack — a bit of hazelnut chocolate, this time. It was broken into pieces and threatened to melt between his fingers. He was sure she’d devour it.

“Right,” he said, grinning mischievously. “Open your mouth.”

Isa obeyed with a simple shrug, her lips parting. Regulus went to feed her the bit of chocolate, but the piece was larger than expected. He had to tilt it.

“A little more—”

“Like thishh?” Isa managed around the mouthful.

“Yeah, perfect.” He nudged it in.

For all the magic Muggles lacked, they sure knew how to make the most creative sweets. Isa moaned again, even louder than before, as the chocolate-nut mixture melted on her tongue.

And that was the precise moment a snort of stifled laughter broke through.

They both froze.

From beyond the bedcurtains came Evan's voice, pitched in a poor whisper but perfectly audible, "C'mon, B, let's go, let them… at it."

There was a snort, and then Barty, sounding delighted, said, "Always forgetting those fucking silencing spells, these two."

Regulus and Isa turned to each other at the same moment, eyes wide, expressions dawning with shared horror as they realised just how their exchanges had sounded.

Slowly, like they were both underwater, they shook their heads, then burst out in unison. "NO!"

Regulus tore the curtains open like he was breaking out of Azkaban. Isa sat up beside him, lips shiny with sherbet dust and some streaks of chocolate.

"Crouch, Rosier — get in here."

Barty leaned against the bedpost, his smirk turning almost feral. "Ooh, well that's kinky, Nott. Didn't know you had it in you."

Isa scowled. "Mind out of the gutter, Crouch, and get your arse over here."

Evan and Barty exchanged a hesitating glance before coming closer. Cautiously, they climbered into the bed.

Isa leaned forward slowly, and both Evan and Barty, almost unconsciously, leaned with her as if she were about to reveal a grand secret.

"Reg," she whispered, eyes gleaming and quickly flickering to Regulus and back, "has the best sodding snacks I've ever eaten."

There was a beat of silence as the boys blinked, clearly bewildered. Then both their gazes dropped to the stash on the bedspread. Their grins split in unison.

"Alright then," Evan said, elbowing Regulus hard enough to nearly knock him off the mattress, "scootch up, losers."

Isa barked with laughter and yanked the curtains shut again.

Within minutes, the four of them were sprawled like smugglers dividing treasure, packets of crisps and sweets scattered across the bed, nightstand and floor. They moaned in delight at the smoothness of Cadbury's Fruit & Nut, fell about laughing at the names of *Spangles* and *Curly Wurly* and attempted to rate everything from Skips to sherbet fountains in order of greatness.

At some point, Isa moaned obscenely over a packet of Skips, fluttering her eyelashes as she licked sherbet from her fingers.

"Alright, Reg," Barty wheezed through laughter, "you're the only one who can tell — is she just delighted, or is she actually having an orgas —"

He was cut off when Evan smacked him over the head with a packet of Wotsits.

Isa barked with laughter. "Don't you wish you knew, Crouch?"

Regulus shook his head, fighting a smile. "You're all deranged."

And just like that, for one evening, Regulus forgot about the war, about Horcruxes, about all the darkness that existed in his world. He let himself sink into the here and now — into sherbet-sticky fingers, Barty's rowdy laughter with Isa, and just generally the almost absurd joy of being seventeen, being surrounded by friends and sniggering over Muggle sweets as though the world outside didn't exist at all.

*****

Unfortunately for Regulus, the world outside *did* exist, and it managed to catch up on him quickly. There wasn't a day without grim news printed in the Prophet or whispered over mealtimes, and just as often, those whispers flared into full-blown clashes between Gryffindors and Slytherins.

Regulus considered himself too busy with literally everything else in his life to bother with such nonsense, but Barty somehow always managed to get dragged in. No matter how many times Regulus told him that corridor duelling was childish, that his energy would be better spent on things that actually mattered— like his duties beyond the castle walls — Barty would only counter that it was good practice, and then promptly land himself in trouble.

The tension wasn't just between Houses, either. The Gryffindors were predictable — most were either radical modernists or loyal to the Ministry. Hufflepuffs leaned mostly Ministry too, though Regulus was sure there were modernists tucked among the older years. The Ravenclaws were the most fractured with some staunch traditionalists, others modernists, and a few sympathetic to the Revolution. Among the Slytherins, there was no modernist to be found — at least not one willing to admit it aloud — but there were some outspoken Ministry loyalists, which meant even crossing the common room sometimes felt like walking into a battlefield.

Even though Regulus, Evan and Barty had been told to conceal their Marks, there was no mistaking Barty's loyalties, and it had already sparked several intra-House scuffles.

Still, the sharpest reminder of reality came not from Hogwarts but from outside its walls, and it came in the form of an invitation from Cissy to visit his supposedly ill mother — or, in other words, to attend a meeting.

It was already December, and Regulus instantly recognised the importance of the meeting. He hadn't been summoned since the start of term, and risking suspicion by having him attend a meeting just three weeks before the holidays — when he could have attended one without raising any suspicions at all — could only mean one thing: they were preparing for something big.

He decided to slip out through Slughorn's office after dinner in the hope to avoid Professor Hoffman's sharp eyes, but something told him that the Defence Professor would know about it anyhow. Still, better safe than sorry.

He didn't see Mother at Grimmauld Place because she was resting as usual. He did, however, run into Father, which turned out to be a very unfortunate event. He asked Regulus a few perfunctory questions about Hogwarts, which Regulus answered rather stiffly and then — and Merlin only knew *why* he would do such a thing — Father offered him some halfhearted compliment about his endeavours for the Dark Lord, leading to the very awkward reality of Regulus having no clue how to respond to the scarce occurrence of his father offering praise.

In the end, all he managed was a silence, a jerky nod — and then a hasty escape to the fireplace.

The discomfort at the encounter with Father quickly gave way for

dread. With the war more intensive than ever, there wasn't a week that went by without casualties from some raid, or from some clash or attack. Being at Hogwarts meant that Regulus didn't know the details, didn't know what exactly was going on behind all the articles in the Prophet or the gossip circling the castle. Sure, he could often fill in the gaps or read between the half-truths, but at the end of the day, he felt very distant from the Revolutionaries' daily activities. He hadn't attended a meeting for months, and as Cissy didn't like to share any useful information by owl, Regulus felt utterly adrift. Somehow, this felt both like a blessing and a burden. It was easier for his conscience not to know and to avoid the spiral of self-flagellation and matters of morality, yet unbearable to sit on the sidelines, useless and uninformed — and, by extension, with nothing to offer to Dorcas.

He realised, very wryly, that at least that was about to change.

So far, there had been three major attacks, all in which Regulus had played a pivotal role: the clash at the Legot estate, the Hohenhain breach, and of course the Dementor attack at Hogwarts. The next would have to surpass them all... Greater than the largest prison break in centuries, greater even than unleashing soul-sucking creatures in a *school*… The only attack that could rival those acts would be one aimed at the Ministry. But how, when, and to what end, he didn't know. For fear, yes — every attack was meant to sow fear — but it couldn't be just that, right? They couldn't waste their grand move on terror alone.

Regulus forced his thoughts to quiet down, reminding himself he had no idea why he was summoned at all, reminding himself of the fact that he was getting ahead of himself, although there was a very persistent voice in his head telling him that there could only be one reason there was a meeting he was expected to attend — for the Great Attack.

Well, it turned out he was absolutely right, though not entirely in the way he had expected.

*****

The closer he came to Bellatrix's meeting room, the tighter the anxiety coiled in his gut, winding with every step he climbed and every corner he turned. By the time he reached the right landing, he was so lost in that suffocating feeling that he welcomed the sight of Cissy waiting just outside the room.

They had exchanged several letters since September, but since most of Cissy's world revolved around the Revolution, and most of Regulus's revolved around betraying the leader of said Revolution, it hardly left fertile ground for conversation. Their letters had been reduced to small talk, polite check-ins and the occasional reminder that they'd see each other soon.

So when she actually did see him, Cissy all but flew into his arms.

"Oh, Reg, I've missed you," she fussed at once, sweeping towards him with fluttering hands. "How are you, have you been well?"

Before he could answer, she was already straightening his hair, smoothing the sleeve of his robe, her sharp eyes scanning him as though she might find all the answers if she just looked intensely enough.

"I'm good, Ci—"

"Are you eating properly? You look thinner."

She circled him, tutting, inspecting him in a way that made him utterly uncomfortable.

"Er, I'm good, Cissy—"

"I should have written more, shouldn't I? Everything's all right with Isa, isn't it—"

"Cissy—"

"I mean, surely it's only a matter of months before—"

"Cissy!"

She stopped short, blinking at him. Regulus glanced over her shoulder, through the open doorway, and realised that the majority of senior Revolutionaries had already gathered. He instantly felt his cheeks burning hot at being fussed over like a child in front of Yaxley, Lucius and the Lestrange brothers.

"I'm all right, truly," he muttered quickly. "How have you been?"

Cissy's expression softened, suddenly a touch bashful. She leaned closer, lowering her voice so only he could hear. "I'm sorry, Reg. It's just… with everything going on, I worry about everyone, about you. I know you're safe at Hogwarts, but still…"

Regulus gave her a small smile despite himself. She stroked his hair once, gently, before stepping aside and ushering him in.

When he stepped inside, Yaxley and Lucius were openly smirking at him, and Regulus had to wrestle down the renewed heat creeping into his cheeks. He clocked that the Dark Lord wasn't there yet, nor Bellatrix, which almost made him sigh with relief. He could not let it shine through that he had, only weeks ago, stolen a piece of the Dark Lord's soul — something which sounded so *ridiculous* and unreal, but was a fact and would very much result in a death too painful to contemplate if he mocked it up.

For once, his prayers were answered, and more and more people filed in. Regulus recognised the usual faces — Mr Rosier, Mr Greengrass, and, to his surprise, Mulciber, Avery and Severus — but there were many he knew only by sight, and some not at all. He had known the numbers were growing, but to know that the *inner circle* was apparently growing too, still somehow came as a surprise.

He went straight to Mr Nott, as he was his future father-in-law now, and they quickly fell into talk of Hogwarts, Isa's wellbeing and Mrs Nott's latest art projects in the Levant, with Mr Nott introducing him to new people in between. He was so caught up in Mr Nott's stories and the determination to show himself at his best to Mr Nott's associates, that he almost forgot why he was there in the first place — until, of course, reality caught up, and the door slammed shut with a sound that made every head turn.

The Dark Lord had entered.

"Thank you for coming," he said, his voice soft but carrying more power than any shout could have. At once, a taut, thick silence fell over the room. Bellatrix swept to his side, eyes wild, lips twitching with excitement. Once sat, she practically vibrated in her seat, and Regulus's throat went dry. That look on her face was never a good sign, after all.

"This evening," the Dark Lord went on, "is a very special one."

An energetic, almost excited, hush followed. Regulus's gaze flickered to Rabastan across the table. His face had turned as pale as Regulus felt on the inside. Regulus quickly looked away, not daring to let his eyes linger too long on anything or anyone , and especially not on the Dark Lord.

"After weeks of planning," the Dark Lord continued, pale fingers

drumming once on the table, “and much deliberation… we have finalised the plan for our next strike.”

A ripple went around the room — a murmur, a sharp intake of breath here and there. Bellatrix gave a laugh which was a little too high, almost a cheer.

Two people Regulus didn’t recognise leaned towards one another. “Surely the Ministry?” one of them whispered.

They were joined by another voice from the other side of the table. “Or the Minister himself, perhaps—”

The Dark Lord’s face split into a smile that made a shiver run the length of Regulus’s spine. He felt the temperature of the room drop instantly.

“Yes,” the Dark Lord said. “We *are* going for the Ministry.”

Immediately, the room erupted with feverish whispers. Bellatrix let out one of her characteristic ecstatic laughs.

“But,” the Dark Lord added, his voice somehow silken in menace, “we will not march through their doors blindly. We shall not hand them a battle on ground of their choosing.”

The noise died instantly. All eyes clung to him, all Revolutionaries hanging onto the Dark Lord’s every word.

“The Ministry is warded as never before. To attempt a frontal assault would be to waste ourselves. No… we require two things.” His cold eyes swept slowly around the table. “First, we need someone within… and second, we need the element of surprise.”

Regulus saw Yaxley smirk, visibly excited. Regulus had an inkling that he already knew the ins and outs of the plan. This also went for Bellatrix, who gave a manic laugh and twirled her wand between her fingers, her entire body thrumming with anticipation for the plan about to be announced.

“In our case,” the Dark Lord went on, “this means not one attack… but two.”

Another sharp silence fell. Regulus could hear his pulse hammer in his ears. His palms were slick with sweat and his throat was unbearably dry, but he did not dare lift his glass of water; he knew his hand

would shake. Instead he pressed his leg hard against the floor and fisted his hands under the table to steady himself, praying that no one would notice his nerves.

Then, the conversation took an unexpected turn.

“Now…” the Dark Lord’s voice turned coldly and oddly amused. “… who among you enjoys dancing?”

What?

A ripple of uneasy laughter followed. Regulus frowned, utterly confused as he had no clue where this bizarre monologue was going.

“There is to be a masked ball,” the Dark Lord explained, “at the estate of Benedict Ashcombe, on New Year’s Eve.”

There was silence.

Ashcombe was the Deputy Minister, and therefore one of the most powerful politicians in the country. Did that mean Minchum was invited too?

“We have found a way to breach their wards,” the Dark Lord said simply. “And so, we shall orchestrate our first strike there.”

Across the table, Regulus saw Mr Nott leaning forward in thought. It was one of his associates that voiced Regulus’s thoughts.

“Surely the Minister of Magic will attend? We could strike him then —”

“Yes,” another cut in eagerly. “What could be bigger than that?”

The Dark Lord's smile widened, and Regulus had to fight the urge to recoil.

“We have intelligence,” he said softly, “that Minchum will not be there.”

The words led to instant disappointment among the group, the discontent visible on everyone’s faces.

“But despair not,” the Dark Lord soothed instantly, a dark chuckle leaving him. “The Modernists and the Ministry alike expect us to mount a great attack. And so — when we strike at the Ball, they will believe it to be the blow they have feared. They will grow careless,

their guard will falter… And all the while, the true blow will wait."

Regulus's mind spun. He instantly recognised just how brilliant the plan was. Everyone was waiting for the Great Attack — Dorcas had even told him so. A strike at a high-security ball, one rumoured to be attended by the Minister, would be convincing enough to fool everyone.

"And," the Dark Lord continued smoothly, "it will serve as the perfect smokescreen to abduct Ashcombe. He carries information vital to the Ministry's defences. He will be presumed dead. And then… armed with what he knows, and when the world least expects it… only *then* will we strike at the Ministry itself. At the Minister of Magic."

The sudden excitement at the table was palpable. Avery, Mulciber and Snape looked at each other, grinning in sheer elation, and Bellatrix seemed to thrum with glee. Everyone murmured and speculated among each other, filling the room with a sudden energy that made Regulus uneasy.

All the while, his own mind raced faster than the quickest Nimbus, just thinking about the plan and how brilliant it was — how, with an attack at the Ball, they'd get their hands on the best person to get into the Ministry for the actual attack that no one would see coming.

Terrifying, but brilliant indeed.

He was pulled from his thoughts by the calm and deep voice of Lucius, who was speaking for the first time.

"Fortunately, we grow by the day, so we have no shortage of able wands." He let his calm eyes go over the table. "Yet, we cannot all attend — the more who go, the more suspicion we draw."

Regulus already felt the question coming, and somehow, before the question was even *posed* and before he could even *think*, his mind had already made up what he was going to answer.

"So… who among us would like to dance at New Year's Eve?"

For weeks — no, for *months* — Regulus had been at the sidelines. Had received no information at all, had had nothing to give to Dorcas. Yes, he had managed to locate and steal a Horcrux, but the war was continuing, and although the Revolutionaries had not suffered any big losses yet — at least not among the inner circle — Regulus was clever enough to make from the snippets of information the Prophet offered,

that the modernists were on the losing side of the war. He needed information, he needed to be on the inside again, needed *something* to have some impact on the course of events.

So, without thinking, without even processing the reality of what he was doing, he raised his hand.

Chapter End Notes

ookay so... Lily Evans is SUCH a boss. Running into potential Death Eater Regulus Black with your Muggle sister in tow and just losing it at the sight of his trolley and then somehow managing to keep it together and give some words of what you're hoping is comfort... ICONIC. We won't see very much of Lily in this series but this is NOT the last you'll see of her, and the things she's doing are definitely worthwhile, believe me.

This chapter also sent me spiraling into research on early-80s UK sweets. since I am tragically too young to have firsthand knowledge, i had to rely on google to provide me with intel. For all those having lived through that era and feeling i did the snack culture no justice, please accept my deepest apologies!! (my lord, my teeth hurt just reading about half of it). The idea of Reg, Barty, Evan and Isa all secretly sniggering behind Reg's curtains while demolishing a mountain of muggle sweets is very dear to me and has been living in my head for weeks.

Story-wise, we're starting to sink into the deeper waters of this fic now, which I'm so excited about. There's still plenty of humour and lighter moments (because Reg's life is nothing if not constant whiplash), but from here on things are going to get more intense.

And what do you think... will we see James anytime soon?

Again, thank you all for commenting and making my day. See you back soon xxx

Chapter 9: Of Insignificance & Balls

Chapter Notes

> Hii there, everyone!
>
> I'm back (again, a day or two later than planned but what else is new?) with an 8,5k chapter nonetheless! I want to thank all of you for your lovely comments and remarks. You, as always, made my day. 💟 I'm aiming to have the next chapter out on Monday in like... then days, but as you'll have noticed, I'm terrible at sticking to deadlines these days. I have a deathly busy month ahead of me. The writing's so much fun and I'm living for the upcoming chapters/events so I'll def try to find moments to write, but the real time to shine will be in a few weeks.
>
> Lots of love, as always! xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Oh, it’s too bloody cold for shopping, isn’t it?” Isa complained as she dropped into the seat at their table in the Three Broomsticks, giving a theatrical shudder.

Regulus pushed a steaming Butterbeer across the table towards her. She threw him a grateful smile, then hunched again against the cold.

“I mean, if it were proper snowing, fair enough,” she went on. “But *no* — all we get is bloody pouring rain.”

Evan smirked. “You know you didn’t have to come, right? I don’t think you’ve set foot in Hogsmeade for ages.”

He wasn’t wrong — Isa only rarely joined them on Hogsmeade weekends, especially if the weather was grim, always claiming there was no point braving the elements just for a few drinks she could just as well have in the castle.

“Yeah, well,” Isa shrugged, warming her hands round her mug, “I needed to buy Christmas presents, so I didn’t really have a choice.”

“Where are Melania and Amaryllis, then?” Evan asked, taking a long pull from his own Butterbeer.

“Still in Twilfitt & Tattings.” Isa rolled her eyes, as if she wasn’t just as

bad with clothes herself. “You couldn’t drag them out if you tried.”

Barty snorted and they drank quietly for a few moments. The pub hummed around them — the majority of students that had been bold enough to defy the rain in the first place had gathered there. Regulus saw many familiar faces but none that required social interaction, until the door opened again and in swept Miller with her two friends. She scanned the room and automatically grinned when she spotted Regulus, who inclined his head in greeting as the girls passed.

“Hi, Cap!” Miller called cheerfully.

“Hi, Miller. Good shopping?”

Her cheeks and nose were red from the cold, but it didn’t seem to dampen her spirits, as she nodded brightly. “Yeah, brilliant.”

Before she could go further, Barty swivelled round lazily in his chair. His eyes raked over the three girls just a touch too long. Violet and Denise dissolved into incredulous giggles, faces pink, while Miller shifted awkwardly on her feet.

“Looking fresh, Miller,” Barty drawled, eyes catching on the dark braids over her shoulders. “The hair suits you.”

Regulus instantly caught his friends’ gazes. Isa shot him a sharp look with her eyebrows shooting up in disbelief. Evan said nothing, sipping his Butterbeer, but his eyes over the rim were sharp and watchful.

“Er… right,” Miller muttered, flushing scarlet, clearly mortified at being singled out by a seventh-year in front of his mates — and her own giggling friends.

“Any plans for the hols, Miller?” Barty continued.

Miller flicked her eyes towards Regulus, which he instantly recognised as a silent plea for guidance. He realised very well how odd it was for Barty to make small talk with fourth-year Miller and instantly sensed something unpleasant prickling at the back of his neck.

“That booth’s just come free,” Regulus said quickly in an attempt to rescue her, nodding at a table further down.

“Cheers, Cap.” Miller’s smile was strained as she ushered Violet and Denise away.

As soon as they were out of earshot, Regulus turned sharply on Barty. "What was *that*, Crouch?"

Barty only sniggered, holding his hands up in mock innocence. "What? Can't chat to your girlfriend?"

Isa skewered him with a glare.

"Figure of speech, of course, Nott," Barty shot instantly, though his expression was rather sheepish.

"You're just out to embarrass her," Regulus snapped. "It's cruel."

"Oh, come off it. Every girl likes a bit of attention, Black. She wasn't embarrassed."

Regulus felt a heated discussion brewing, but then Evan — who'd been uncharacteristically silent so far, since he was normally the first to call Barty out — motioned them both to shut up, and changed the topic.

"So, Isa — any plans for the hols?"

Isa seemed glad for the change of subject and sighed. "Nothing much. Staying in Manchester. Going to the Annual Ball at Dreadmoor Keep, of course. You?"

"Same as usual," Evan said. "Barty's staying with me."

A short silence followed, the thought of Barty's mum hanging heavily in the air. They all knew she was ill, they all knew she was in Germany and regularly hospitalised, but no one knew how she was doing at present, or whether Barty was planning on visiting her.

In the end, no one dared to raise the topic. Sometimes, if Barty was in a generous mood, he would talk about his father, how much he loathed him and how the man had always failed his spouse. His mother he almost never mentioned — except with Evan, or rarely and briefly when staggeringly drunk. It was, after all, easier to rage about hate than speak of guilt and heartbreak.

And now, with no one daring to put Barty in one of the moods in which he'd shut down instantly at the mention of his parents, they just let it linger for a moment long enough to acknowledge it was there, but without actually talking about it.

Isa broke the pause. “So you’ll be at the ball too, then?” she asked Barty.

Barty smirked, not showing any discomfort at all. “Oh,” he said with a smug lilt, “I’ll be at plenty of balls, Nott.”

Whatever sympathy Regulus had felt for him quickly evaporated, now replaced by the initial chagrin. He kicked Barty hard under the table.

“Ow! Can’t do a thing right with you today, can I, Black?” Barty hissed, rubbing his shin.

Regulus ignored him. Isa looked confused, and Regulus wasn’t ready for that confusion to morph into suspicion. It was all a joke for Barty — who had even declared he hoped his father would be there — but Regulus knew better. The Ball was no joke. It was going to be dangerous, and their lives would be on the line just as much as everyone else’s.

Hence, the reason why he had to leave his friends behind in the pub. The fact that Isa had last-minute decided to tag along had complicated things — for she was harder to shake than Barty and Evan — but on his way to the village he had already thought of the perfect excuse.

He cleared his throat. “I need to nip to Tomes and Scrolls, look at a book,” he said casually.

As expected, Isa asked at once, “Want me to come?”

Regulus made a bit of a show of looking panicked, glancing at Evan and Barty for help. All three looked faintly confused, Barty visibly wondering what he’d missed.

“No,” Regulus said at last, stiffly. “You… can’t. Not this time. I need to do some… shopping.”

It came out as stiff as he’d hoped, and he quickly saw the amused glint in Isa’s eyes, who would now be thinking what he had aimed for — that Regulus was going to do some secret shopping for Christmas presents for his fiancée. Little did she know that he’d already handled all of this weeks ago with Cissy’s help.

He rose. “Don’t let Crouch ply you with Firewhisky while I’m gone,” he said over his shoulder.

Isa opened her mouth — no doubt to begin a lecture on free will and

women's independence — but Regulus cut her off with an exasperated look. "I've got to go, Ies."

She rolled her eyes, but let him go.

*****

He hadn't expected it to happen, but once Regulus heard about the Great Attack, instead of racing straight to Dorcas and spilling all the details, he had been… oddly unsure what to do.

He had made the decision to go to Valaine so long ago… Already over the Easter holidays the previous year had he decided to contact his Defence Professor and join forces. It had taken him a long time and the rather harsh words from Dorcas to come to terms with it, but he could at last *acknowledge* — albeit in his own mind only — the fact that he was now, effectively, a spy. For which camp he wasn't exactly sure — as he refused to be in Dumbledore's — but yes, he was conspiring against the Dark Lord with Dorcas and, behind the scenes, Valaine. And now, finally, for the first time since that plan had formed in his mind, he could pass on something. Could make a difference. Could actually *do* something.

He had waited for this moment, had thought and philosophised and strategised about his role in all of this, and, now it had finally arrived, he found himself not knowing what to do with it.

The Revolutionaries were going to strike at Ashcombe's ball. Many top politicians would be there, Barty's own father would probably be there… They were all small pieces of a much larger problem — an entire polity fraying at the edges, rulers of a country where tensions and issues had been neglected for years, where rulers had been so terrified of losing their grip on power that they'd ignored years of festering divisions, letting the wedge between people grow so sharp that the only possible outcome seemed full-scale war.

So, logically, Regulus disliked them all, but that didn't mean he necessarily thought they deserved to die. Still, the clashes at the Ball would be between Ministry forces and Revolutionaries. There would be no modernists, there would be no Order…

This would all change once he told Dorcas. The confrontation would no longer be merely Ministry versus Revolutionaries; the Order would be involved too. And the presence of the Order could mean the presence of Sirius, the presence of *James*…

For the first time Regulus realised, with sharp cold clarity, that the Plan he'd devised to stop the Dark Lord and protect the people he loved might instead put those very people in mortal danger.

So, it was with a gnawing guilt, a chaotic heart and an incredibly confused mind that he pushed open the door of the Muggle pub where Dorcas was already waiting.

She rose at once, caught the grave look on his face, and let out a soft breath. "Oh," she sighed, "this is about the Great Attack, isn't it?"

He nodded. "Yes. It's at New Year's Eve—"

"—at the Ball," she finished for him.

He slumped in his chair with a long, tired sigh.

Dorcas gathered herself quickly. "So what's the plan? Just kill a few and call it terror? Spread some Death Eater fear and be done with it?"

Regulus shook his head. "No," he said. "It's a prelude. They're going to abduct Ashcombe, make it look like he was murdered. The idea is no one knows it was the… Death Eaters who did it. We've orders not to cast the Mark."

Dorcas huffed — a slow and judgmental sound. "Clever. So people won't be sure; they'll have to keep guessing." She shook her head slightly. "It'll breed distrust…. *Very* effective, given the state of things."

Regulus nodded, not really sure where to go from there. He was grateful for the almost cold cup of coffee in front of him that he could cradle in his hands so he at least had something to do.

"You said prelude," Dorcas pressed. "Prelude to what?"

"Well," he said carefully. "The main goal is to abduct Ashcombe…"

He let the words hang, long enough for the realisation to hit her. Darkness flashed in her already dark eyes.

"So the next step is the Ministry."

Regulus heaved a very long sigh, some of the tension in him deflating along the way. "Yes. I don't have the full details yet, but I think they'll bide their time… Prepare thoroughly with whatever information they can glean from Ashcombe, and then strike."

Dorcas closed her eyes and shivered. “If they get the Ministry — the Minister — it’s the end of the world as we know it.” She looked up at him, voice low. “It’ll be chaos. Dictatorship, people in hiding… total oppression.” She stopped, jaw working. “We can’t let that happen.”

Regulus let out another breath he did not know he’d been holding.

Dorcas’s gaze sharpened. “Right… So we’ll have to fuck it up — we have to stop them. That’s the only thing we can do.”

“Can’t we somehow warn Ashcombe? So he can call off the Ball and that’s that?”

“No,” Dorcas said at once, shaking her head. “The Ministry and the modernists are at each other’s throats. Ashcombe wouldn’t take the warning seriously. And if we tried, and Voldemort caught wind of it, it would be traced back to someone in his inner circle.” She fixed him with a hard stare. “And we really can’t have that. If the Order turns up at the Ball and gets recognised as modernists rather than Aurors, fine — it can be dismissed as part of an Order mission. But if the Ball’s called off altogether… that proves there’s a leak.”

Regulus swallowed as he was forced to admit defeat. Dorcas was right, there was no way around it. The Ball would have to continue, with all the consequences that followed. He gave a curt nod.

“So,” Dorcas said, her tone sharpening into business. “What do you know? Who’s infiltrating? What’s the plan?”

“Well.” Regulus shifted. “There’s… me.”

Dorcas’s eyes closed for a beat. When they opened again, disbelief flashed in them. “They’re sending a schoolboy to orchestrate an attack on the Deputy Minister’s estate?”

Regulus tried to push down the storm of emotions that instantly surged through him. Yet again, Dorcas reduced him to his age — to some incapable child. If she only knew what he’d already done, what he’d pulled off years younger than he was now—

And then, realising exactly *what* he had done and pulled off over the last few years, his stomach lurched violently. The sense of self-loathing was overwhelming as he realised that part of him took pride in what he had done, in what he had been involved in.

He swallowed.

“They didn’t send me,” he managed at last. “I… volunteered.”

Dorcas’s brows shot up. “And why, exactly, would you do *that*?”

“Well, it gives us the best chance. Information, positioning. The best way to steer what happens on the ground…”

“It also risks losing our most important source of information,” she said flatly.

He gave a shrug, forcing lightness. “I’ll try not to get killed.”

A short beat followed, and then, somehow — Regulus had no idea how — they both broke out laughing. All of it was so… sinister and dark, but they just relished their bitter sense of humour for a moment, until the silence closed back in.

“Who else is going?” Dorcas asked at last.

Ah. This was the other part that had initially held Regulus back from running to the woman across from him. Apparently there was something in his expression that gave his hesitation away — or Dorcas really was that perceptive — because her eyebrow arched in silent demand.

“There’s seven of us,” Regulus admitted. “Yaxley, Travers, Rowle, Mr Nott—”

“Your father-in-law?” she cut in, sharp.

“Future father-in-law,” Regulus corrected stiffly.

She inclined her head for him to go on.

He cleared his throat. “And… Evan Rosier. And then… Barty… Barty Crouch.”

Dorcas’s eyes darkened instantly. “You mean Bartemius Crouch’s *son*?”

His throat was dry as he nodded.

It only took a heartbeat for the realisation to strike her, and Regulus could see it unfold across her face in real time.

“You’re telling me there are *three* Death Eater teenagers running around Hogwarts and you failed to notify me?”

He'd anticipated this, of course. He always knew he'd have to tell her eventually, but until now it hadn't been strictly necessary. He coughed lightly, keeping his face carefully blank. "It wasn't really relevant before. They couldn't do anything, stuck at school."

Dorcas's mouth tightened. "I'll be the judge of what's relevant. Three Death Eaters at Hogwarts…" She scoffed, shaking her head. "Bloody hell."

Regulus didn't trust his words in the unlikely event he could find any at all, so he decided to bite his tongue.

"So," Dorcas said coolly, "did Evan and Barty volunteer as well?"

"No," Regulus said. "Apparently Lucius and Yaxley promised Barty they'd include him whenever his father's expected to be present."

It took a remarkably long time for Dorcas to understand what these words exactly meant.

"*Oh*," she breathed. "That's… twisted."

Regulus kept his expression blank.

He was sure that a part — a very large one, for that matter — of Barty wanted his father dead. And somehow, Regulus understood. Understood that years of neglect, of watching his mother mistreated, of being dismissed and stripped of any agency, had turned Barty into absolutely, utterly *loathing* his father. As most people were raised by loving or at least unabusive parents, many wouldn't understand this — how hatred could become the very marrow of a child's bones.

And deep down, part of Regulus envied Barty for it. Although Regulus was sure there was a part of his friend still stubbornly loyal to his father — somewhere deep down still longing for his approval and recognition — the part that absolutely wanted his father dead was bigger. And Regulus envied it — the clean, sharp hatred that gave his friend permission to kill. Because Regulus knew that, at the end of the day, no matter how bad the nightmares, no matter how sickening the vivid memories of his Governor whispering in his ears or invading his body, he would never be able to kill the man. The knowledge that he was so weak, that there was, after all this and after all this time, still a part of him that loved his biggest nightmare, made him hate himself so deeply that it left him nauseous.

Dorcas's voice pulled him out of his thoughts.

“And Evan?”

“Made Lucius and Yaxley promise that if Barty went, he’d go too.”

Dorcas let out a long, weary sigh. “So then… what’s the plan?”

Regulus straightened a little. “Alright. They want to lure Ashcombe out to the west quarter of his estate around half-one, when the countdown’s finished and most guests are drunk.”

“Clever,” Dorcas muttered darkly.

“There’ll be an explosion to make it credible Ashcombe’s body’s lost. They’ve got an unauthorised Portkey — arranged by a mole in the Department of Magical Transportation — to take Ashcombe to the Lestrange estate.”

Silence fell briefly.

“And of course,” Regulus continued, “the idea is to gather as many of the rival politicians around him at the time as possible.”

“To kill as many as they can,” Dorcas said flatly.

He nodded.

Dorcas exhaled slowly, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Alright. What more?”

So he told her. Everything he knew — who’d been at the meeting, what the Lestrange estate looked like, what role each Revolutionary usually played, what raids he expected to precede New Year’s Eve. It was a relentless back-and-forth that left him feeling scrutinised to the bones, but he knew Dorcas needed every scrap of information, and that this was, in the end, what he’d signed up for.

Still, Regulus had learnt from last time he slipped out of Hogsmeade and was clever enough not to risk Hoffman or Isa’s suspicion again, so he made sure to get back with time to spare.

Besides, there was one other errand he needed to run first.

Bracing against the miserable weather, he made his way quickly to the Hogsmeade branch of Magical Menagerie. It was late in the afternoon, so most students had already trudged back to the castle or found warmth in a pub, leaving the shop quiet and empty save for him and an elderly witch browsing cages. The place smelled heavily of straw

and feathers, alive with the rustle and chatter of magical creatures in their enclosures.

The shopkeeper was a wiry wizard with grey hair and half-moon spectacles.

“Looking for anything in particular, my boy?” he asked.

Regulus’s eyes stilled on an owl, a proud and sleek brown one with amber eyes. It was beautiful.

“Yes, I’m looking for an owl,” he said simply. Then he pointed at the animal. “That one.”

*****

Regulus barely managed a wink of sleep in the week leading up to the Christmas holidays. Every time he closed his eyes, his mind went over a thousand scenarios for the Ministry Ball — and in every single one, no matter *what* exactly happened, Evan and Barty ended up dead. In some act of mercy he couldn’t explain, his mind refused to deal with the possibility of James and Sirius being there too, because whenever he tried to picture them at the estate, his thoughts simply stalled. The idea of standing in the same room as both his brother and the love of his life… at first, his heart would leap, completely on instinct, but after the rush would always come the sickening drop, weighted down by all the danger their presence came with.

The lack of sleep due to this whirlstorm of emotions, all his N.E.W.T. work, the always prying eyes of his Defense Professor and well, in general, the very likely possibility of dying at the Ashcombe Estate in a matter of weeks, made him emotional in a way he couldn’t untangle.

By day, he was mostly irritated, snapping at the smallest things and not finding the joy in anything, least of all Barty’s plenty not-so-subtle hints about their next attack. The only one able to coax him out of his misery, at least partially, was Miller, but as he couldn’t be seen too much with her and the weather was absolutely dreadful, the reprieve was sparse.

And at night… well, at night his mind was plagued by so many emotions and thoughts that it was a miracle he hadn’t combusted on the spot already.

He thought about Sirius and how he longed to see his ridiculous grin,

while at the same time feeling the urge, the deep, *deep* desire to hex him into next week for not being here with him. He thought about Isa, and the part he was meant to play in her life. About what might or might not make him a good husband. He thought about the people he could not afford to disappoint — Cissy, Mother, Father, Mr Nott... And he thought about his Governor, and the incomprehensible, unbearable dichotomy between his gentle words and his filthy hands.

Not all of them came every night. Some nights Sirius wasn't there, sometimes Isa was mercifully absent.

But not James.

James was there, always, every night again, making him feel so much, so *deeply*, and he had no idea what to do with it.

These were the times he felt closest to James and, in a strange way, to himself too, for he felt so in touch with the part of him that he'd built with him. The dreams were so vivid and real, the starkest reminder that James had indeed been *there*, loving him and being loved in return, and flashing that cocky grin, or trying to hide that bashful blush. And the flush of emoticons was so strong — the hollow grief, the blistering unfairness of it all, but also the gratitude for having been graced with all that was James Potter… And then, always, followed that ache, the all-consuming and burning longing for the only person he had willingly, with complete trust, let into the touch of his skin, the catch of his breath and the spill of a moan, and he'd feel all of that burning through his bones, spearing through his heart. And he'd chase it, hand between his thighs, climbing higher and higher — but the higher he climbed, the deeper he fell.

And then he would cry, bowl, weep into his sheets, trembling not from desire but from absence, breath catching not from pleasure but from sorrow, until all strength and all hunger — even for life itself — had drained from his body. And then, hollowed out, he would snatch what little sleep he could before a new day, and a new cycle of all of this, inevitably started.

So, considering all of this, Regulus was clever enough to not expect much enjoyment when entering the holidays. What he hadn't accounted for, though, was just how many sources the lack of joy would spring from.

The journey on the Hogwarts Express was a quiet one. Regulus had forced himself to go to bed early the night before, knowing he'd need

every scrap of rest, but Barty, Evan and Isa had stayed in the common room until the small hours, snuffing out even Barty's usual rowdiness and Isa's sparkling wit.

Within sheer minutes of the train setting off, Isa surrendered to sleep. She started off leaning awkwardly against Regulus's shoulder, but the angle looked so uncomfortable that he decided to ease her down into his lap.

Barty followed not much later, slumping against Evan's shoulder with far more ease, as though he'd simply… slotted into place. A little line of drool escaped his mouth as he dozed, snoring faintly, and the sight made Regulus snort. Evan caught it and smiled, indulgent and oddly gentle, careful not to wake him. Every time when he spoke, he lowered his voice and occasionally, he'd close his own eyes too.

Regulus glanced down at Isa sprawled across his lap, her golden hair spilling over his legs, her arms slack at her sides and her face turned towards Barty and Evan. Very carefully, he rearranged her hands so they rested more comfortably, then brushed her hair from her face. A few downy strands at the nape of her neck caught the light, glowing pale gold. He smoothed them on instinct, stroking them gently with the tip of his finger. Isa smiled faintly in her sleep as a response and Regulus, without realising, smiled back.

Then, suddenly realising how intimate the moment was and the fact they weren't alone, his eyes shot up — to catch Evan, indeed, watching.

A small, almost wry moment of eye contact followed, and then Evan offered a wordless smile before turning back to the window with Barty still fast asleep against him. If Barty had seen the gesture, it would have resulted in days of teasing and jokes about destiny and whatnot, and Regulus could not have put into words just how much he appreciated Evan for leaving nameless what he himself could not begin to explain.

At some point, Regulus must have dozed off, because the next thing he knew the train had already slowed to a crawl, and not much later they were pulling into King's Cross. The compartment stirred, everyone waking from their own doze.

"You Apparating to Black Manor?" Isa asked, her voice still thick with sleep.

Regulus shook his head as he wrestled both their suitcases down the

corridor. “No. Grimmauld Place first.”

Isa made a low sound, a dark note threading her voice. “Ah. A check-up supper with your parents?”

“Yeah. Something like that.”

It was more or less true — though it would be him doing the checking, not the other way around, as was usually the case. He hadn’t been invited by his parents; he couldn’t remember the last time he’d sat down at a table with them at all. He also couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen Mother leave the house. Each time he Flooed in from Hogwarts she had been resting in her bedroom. He hadn’t seen her in what felt like ages, and somehow the relief of that had, over the last few weeks, very slowly soured into something closer to concern.

So, once on the platform, Regulus made for the Apparition point, turned neatly on the spot, and a heartbeat later landed on the familiar doorstep of Grimmauld Place.

The moment he stepped inside, he heard the familiar *crack* and saw Kreacher appear, ears flapping as he bowed so low his nose almost brushed the floor.

“Ohhh, Master Regulus graces poor Kreacher’s halls again,” the elf croaked, reverence plain in his voice. “So tall, so fine in his school robes — robes wrinkled from the filthy train, yes, yes — Kreacher will fix them, Kreacher will make Master presentable, Master Orion will be proud—”

Before Regulus could protest, Kreacher had bustled forward, already reaching for his suitcase. “Heavy luggage, far too heavy for Master Regulus’s delicate hands—”

“I can manage—” Regulus began, but Kreacher had already wrested the case away, dragging it down the hall in his wiry arms.

Regulus had always been rather fond of him, even though he made him a bit uncomfortable. Kreacher was a bit too fussy, and Regulus definitely preferred Whiskerly’s tendency to keep to the background, but Regulus knew that Kreacher’s eagerness came from a good place. Besides, on visits from Seacliff Hall, he had somehow always sensed when something was wrong, quietly helping him out. Whenever Regulus broke something, Kreacher would mend it before Mother or Father noticed; he would find excuses for Regulus to keep resting in his bedroom, granting him brief and much-needed reprieves from both

his mother and his governor. The Elf had no idea how much that had meant.

“And the coat, filthy Muggle soot all over it,” Kreacher carried on once the suitcase was deposited for later. He tugged insistently at Regulus’s sleeve until he shrugged free of the garment. “Kreacher will beat it clean, Kreacher will hang it, just as Mistress likes, yes, yes…”

“Thank you, Kreacher,” Regulus said, gentle but firm. “I won’t be staying long. I’d like to dine with Mother, and then I’ll go on to Black Manor. Is she here?”

Kreacher froze, coat clutched to his chest, eyes darting towards the ceiling. His voice dropped to a conspiratorial rasp. “Mistress is… not well, Master Regulus. Best not to disturb her. She must rest. Kreacher watches over her, yes, yes. Sleep is good for Mistress. Food only troubles her stomach—”

Regulus frowned. “She can’t rest forever. She must eat something. Where’s Father?”

“Master Orion works,” Kreacher said at once, straightening with stiff pride. “Always working, always for the glory of the House of Black. Not at home, no. Not for Mistress, no…” His voice suddenly sounded remarkably bitter.

Regulus had more or less expected that answer, but he wasn’t going to get brushed off that easy. He nodded once, then promptly turned for the staircase.

“I’m sure Mother will want something soon, Kreacher. I’ll see her myself.”

Kreacher scuttled after him, nearly tripping over his own ears, still clutching the coat. “No, Master Regulus, Mistress mustn’t be troubled — she’s sleeping, she’s dreaming, better to leave her in peace, better to let Kreacher—”

But Regulus was already climbing the stairs, ignoring the Elf’s protests. Once at the landing, he paused outside Mother’s door, then knocked softly. There was no reply. Slowly, he eased the door open, the old hinges creaking faintly.

The only light in the bedroom came from the winter light filtering through the heavy curtains. Regulus’s eyes, even in the dim light, instantly landed on the canopy bed. Mother was indeed sleeping, her

figure looking small against the great mound of pillows.

Regulus's heart sank at the sight.

He hardly recognised her. She looked… frail, almost translucent. The lines of her face were softened in sleep, and nothing was left of that usual scowl — no thin-lipped disgust, no sharp glare. Just a pale, slack face, so strangely peaceful in the absence of any emotions. It flung him back to earlier days in a way he hadn't at all been prepared for.

He knew that she'd been made ill for the St. Mungo records, to make her illness credible. And he was intelligent enough to know that, despite all Cissy's reassurances that she'd be okay after taking counter-medicines, that whatever they'd done would take *some* toll on her.

But this… this was different. He knew she hadn't been particularly eager to leave the house ever since Sirius left, but he'd assumed it was… some form of grief. Her favourite son had gone, so surely she'd have to process that. And Mother had never been the best at regulating emotions — very much like Sirius — so it was only logical she'd take her time.

But now Regulus, with a cold, sinking clarity, realised that perhaps it wasn't a matter of time. That perhaps… there wasn't really a getting back at all.

Quietly, he slipped off his shoes and padded on socked feet to the bedside, perching on the edge of the mattress near her torso. His voice was barely a whisper. "Mother?"

Silence. He took in the papery skin, the alarming stillness of her features. A strange melancholy mastered him as he watched her, looking more than ever before like she had in another lifetime. His hand trembled as he brushed a strand of hair back from her face. His voice almost broke.

"…Mum?"

Her eyes fluttered open. For a moment they were unfocused, then sharpened slowly, as though through fog. "…Regulus?"

He pressed hard against the sting in his eyes. He could not cry. If Mother saw him crying she would try to hex him wandlessly — and might actually die from the effort. He swallowed the dry tightness in his throat.

“What are you doing here?” Her voice was weak, as if it had to be coaxed out.

“I thought we’d have dinner,” he said clumsily, realising at once how utterly stupid that sounded.

Mother blinked at the ceiling and turned her face away toward the pillow. “I’m not hungry.”

Regulus felt stranded. He had no clue at all how to respond to Mother being… like this. He could deal with the distance, the barbed remarks, the coldness that was such a great part of her. But this… he had no idea how to do *this*.

“Are you… all right, Mother? You must eat.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said, her voice regaining more of that usual sternness.

Sudden panic seized him. She was so… unlike *her*. He didn’t know how to do this, and the lump in his throat only grew as he realised that Sirius would have known. His brother had always known so much better how to respond to her. Had always been so much more in tune with her — until Hogwarts, of course.

“Is it because you’re ill? Shall we call a Healer?” Regulus asked, the voice betraying the panic he was so desperately trying to smother.

Mother went on as if he hadn’t spoken. “Nothing matters any more.”

All of a sudden, a conversation with Cissy flitted through his mind.

“She wanted this, Reg. You know how dedicated she is to the Cause.”

“No — this… this is… next level. What if she doesn’t get better?”

“She will. We have the antidote. We just need to wait a little longer — until St. Mungo’s has enough records of her ‘condition’ to make it convincing.”

He suddenly felt, in an odd way, as if Cissy had betrayed him. The rage and disbelief prickled under his skin. Did she know? Did Cissy know what Mother’s so-called dedication had turned her into?

“They’ve made you ill for it. For what — for this?” His voice broke.

Mother watched the ceiling, not looking at him in a way that made

him very uncomfortable. “It’s the only thing I had to give, so I gave it.” A brittle little laugh. “I’ve lost everything already.”

“What do you mean—” he demanded, breathless.

Again, she didn’t seem to hear him at all, didn’t seem to take in any of the words Regulus was saying. Even her gaze didn’t seem to register him as it so obviously drifted past him into the nothingness of the room.

“I’ve lost my son already.”

Regulus knew how pessimistic Mother could be, but this was really taking it to a new level. He’d already weathered so much, after all.

“Look, Mother, I’m not go—”

But then, suddenly, he realised. And it rolled through him like the coldest ice, curling around his throat, constricting him.

She wasn’t talking about him.

She was talking about Sirius. Sirius, who, for all she knew, was living a comfortable life somewhere.

And after all that *he* had done, of all the times *he* had risked his life for the cause… The number of times he’d stood in front of an Auror or modernist just seconds away from being killed. The number of times he’d *just* dodged the green sparks in time. Hohenhain — how he’d basically been sent in like some sacrificial animal… The number of times he had looked death in the eye before he had even come of age.

Of all the times she could have actually, *knowingly*, lost him.

And yet, here she was, grieving the loss of her son. Not *a* son. Her son. The only son who mattered.

He sucked in a sharp breath. The sense of being diminished, of being so utterly expendable in her eyes, was so visceral it made the room spin.

Mother didn’t see his reaction, as she was hunched forward, her eyes glistening and so full of sorrow and pain, that Regulus, without thinking, folded his arms around her. Against all odds, he felt her going slack against him, as if suddenly exhausted of the last of her defences. He felt her shaking, the small, wracking sobs dragged into

the crook of his shoulder.

Regulus, having grown into a man, was so much taller and stronger than her, yet he had never felt so small, so reduced, so frail — holding the woman who, more clearly than ever, would give him up in a heartbeat if it meant she could have her other son instead.

And so he cried. Silent enough that she wouldn't notice, but he couldn't stop it — couldn't stop the tears from silently tracking down his face and dampening his collar, feeling so insignificant and meaningless and, worst of all, ashamed. Ashamed that despite all of it, despite the truth that had become so undeniably clear, he still craved nothing more than to be the son his mother was currently weeping for.

And so, in utter silence and in deep shame, he wept.

*****

Regulus's foul mood lingered through the rest of the holidays, during which he went to every length to see as little of anyone as possible. He didn't go for drinks at the Serpent once — not even after a successful raid with Evan and Barty. Barty had been visibly agitated by this, but Evan had merely given him an understanding smile and a clap on the back at departure. Barring the two mornings Cissy — clearly worried about him — arrived uninvited to have breakfast with him, he saw no family either.

The only one he'd met voluntarily was Isa, for no matter how heavy his heart, there was no escaping his duties as a fiancé. Isa had definitely noticed something was wrong though, and seemed surprised he had even turned up at the Nott estate at all, the first thing she said being, almost defensively, "If you're looking for Father, he's probably in the library — that's where he arranges business these days."

She had been visibly pleased he wasn't shutting her out where he so easily might have done over the holidays, and they spent many of the days together, either at her estate or at Black Manor — mostly in companionable silence, reading or working on assignments, with the occasional summons from Mr Nott for Regulus to lend a hand with strategy for New Year's Eve.

Unfortunately, he couldn't remain in his self-imposed exile forever, as he'd have to show up at one of the year's most dreaded events.

"You look rather striking," Isa said as they prepared to leave, her eyes

trailing over him. He wore deep midnight-blue robes that Cissy had insisted brought out the colour of his eyes. They were, of course, chosen to match Isa's gown. She was wearing a soft blue dress, her hair in a curling up-do and, frankly, looking prettier than ever.

Regulus's eyes travelled slowly over her, taking her in from the golden curls falling around her cheeks to the gleam of her leather heels, and he couldn't help noticing just how pretty she was. Isa caught his admiring eyes and blushed faintly. It was then that Regulus was once again struck by how desperately unfair it was that they didn't love each other. It would have been so much easier if they had.

Mr Nott cleared his throat very awkwardly at the visible tension between his daughter and future son-in-law. Regulus snapped back to himself, suddenly aware he was very much in the presence of all his in-laws, and he had to fight the heat rising up his cheeks as he realised they would all assume he had been undressing her with his eyes and thinking very inappropriate thoughts.

Isa snorted quietly and, mercifully, steered him outside before the moment could grow more unbearable.

The Ball was as grand as ever with the familiar glittering chandeliers, the heavy garlands wound through the banisters and, of course, the endless tables of food and drink.

He was seated with the Notts. Last year he'd been seated with them too in a clear signal of intent, but now there was no other option, as he was engaged to Isa. Besides, there wasn't really any other fitting place for him either, because Mother wasn't there and Father was seated with some business associates.

Regulus could not help glancing again and again at the seat where his mother would usually have been, each time feeling his appetite vanish and finding it harder and harder to force polite laughter with the Notts.

It also didn't help that Barty was there too, definitely trying to cheer him up and somehow accomplishing the exact opposite in the process. He kept trying to drag Regulus into drinking or onto the dance floor with Isa, both things he was very much not inclined towards.

"C'mon, Black, have a shot with us!" he shouted from the bar, surrounded by Avery, Mulciber and Evan.

"No, thanks," Regulus said flatly.

“Oh, for Merlin’s sake, c’mon, Black—”

“He said no, B,” Evan cut in, sharper than usual. Barty rolled his eyes theatrically, but Evan turned back to Regulus with an apologetic smile. “If you’re looking for Isa, I think she went for a drink near the entrance hall.”

Regulus nodded and decided, although he hadn't been looking for her at all, to go find her anyway as he much more preferred Isa’s company to Barty’s attempts to get him drunk. Very soon, though, he would like to hex himself for it, for if he had just taken a drink, if he had just endured Barty's badgering, he would have been spared one of the last sights he could bear to see.

Because, in his search for Isa, he almost ran into Cissy — whose fussing and shrill delight at events like these he definitely couldn’t stomach right now — and in the very desperate attempt to avoid her, he ducked into a side room which, he realised with jarring clarity, was already occupied.

By Father. And a witch.

A witch Regulus vaguely recognised but could not even by the help of Merlin name, but who very much had her legs wound tight around Father in a very compromising knot. In that first fleeting moment where his presence hadn’t been clocked yet and Regulus stood nailed to the floor, absolutely drumstruck, he saw the unmistakable rhythm of his father thrusting into a moaning woman who was most certainly not his wife.

Then the woman's eyes widened as she saw him, her mouth failing open and her eyes almost popping out of their sockets. Father followed her gaze, and the movements and the sounds — very mercifully — ceased, but Regulus knew that the image was already seared into his mind and was one he could never, ever be able to unsee.

“Regulus—”

His head snapped up, meeting his father’s look, and he was struck by his gaze — the gaze that wasn’t apologetic in the slightest, but instead irritated, as though his son stumbling upon him moving into another woman was nothing more than a minor inconvenience.

A blinding, raging, *aching* fury overtook him.

He, naturally, knew it happened — a lot. With marriages more often made by parents and politics rather than love or attraction, it was probably asking for the sheer level of infidelity in their circles. Besides, he'd heard the accusation by Sirius so often, usually during some furious row with their parents about the dismal state of their world, because — as much as Sirius was a womaniser — Regulus knew that he was, like himself, also very much monogamous.

The fury burned even hotter at the realisation, the knowledge that this was the rule and not the expectation — that infidelity, affairs, betrayals were so normal, and that everyone turned a blind eye, at least when men did it. The knowledge that they all called themselves traditionalists, conservatives, defenders of family — while at the same time very much tearing down the foundation stone by stone — the family, the role of patriarch, of a leader, all undermined for the sake of a quick shag.

And the fury *blazed* when he realised that despite them all being so filthy and so despicable and unworthy, they would never be called to account. These men would never be punished, never be chastised, whereas *he*, if anyone ever found out whom he loved, whom he had touched — despite it being wholly consensual, despite the fact had he had cheated on no one — *he* would be the one dragged out and lunched. Lynched even though all he had done was love — love so pure, so untainted, that if he were allowed, he'd pledge himself to James Potter for the rest of his days, as true as loyal as any husband. But no — society, this diseased, hypocritical society, would rather permit its patriarchs to whore their way through half the country than allow *him* to marry the man he loved, to whom he would stay true until his very last breath.

And the fury all but *peaked* when his father's eyes flicked at him, quietly commanding him to get lost and leave him to it, and to not tell Mother, who they both knew lay frail in her bed.

So with unparalleled force, he turned sharply on his heel and slammed the door closed so violently it was a miracle the hinges held.

He stormed back to the main hall, willing more than ever for this horrible evening to end. For the first time in ages he truly wanted a drink, and somehow, now that he could actually use one of Barty's foul mixes, his friends were nowhere to be found. He snatched a Firewhisky from the bar and downed it in one swallow, pleased with the burn clawing down his throat. The hall was far too crowded for his liking, with too many people eager to corner him in conversation

and too many reporters hungry for a photograph, so he slipped away into another side chamber — where, luck finally on his side, he ran into Barty and Evan.

So much later, he would slap himself in the face for missing it, for not clocking it, though he understood it — understand that his mind had been so fogged and so reeling and in shock by what he'd run into. He'd feel so utterly *thick* for not taking a few seconds to actually *see* what was there in plain sight.

But now, he just sighed, relieved to have found a few sources of distraction when he saw Barty and Evan on a little patch of floor passing for a dance space, Barty twirling in some flourish, Evan steadying him with both hands as he laughed, low and indulgent. Barty was the first to clock him as Regulus entered, and he laughed hard, clearly drunk. Then Regulus's eyes slid to Evan, and a prickle cut through the fog — an uneasy prickle at the fact that Evan somehow looked more apologetic than Father who had, in fact, had all the reason to.

The sensation ebbed quickly as Evan asked, "You all right, Reg?"

Regulus slumped against the wall, knocking his head back against the panelling as though to wake himself from a nightmare.

Then he sighed.

"Let's get a fucking drink, Crouch."

"That's the spirit!" Barty whooped, flinging an arm across Regulus's shoulders, the other over Evan's, and together the three of them staggered out into the noise of the Ball.

*****

Some time later, Regulus was admittedly well on his way to getting drunk, though he'd been clever enough to slip out from under Barty's relentless attempts to drink him under the table. There were too many hawk eyes around, and he couldn't risk making a fool of himself in front of the entire country's pureblood elite, so he, very wisely, had withdrawn to the hidden balcony terrace behind the tapestry for a breath of much needed air.

He might have stood there for minutes or for hours, leaning against the balustrade and staring blankly over the endless lawns and hedges of Deadmoor Keep, when the door creaked open. A wash of music and

laughter spilled out, then muffled again as it shut — and Isa stepped out beside him.

Regulus remained where he was, still looking at the grounds while Isa stood next to him in silence, their shoulders brushing.

“I thought I’d find you here,” she said.

Regulus gave a small nod, the silence stretching.

“How about a dance?” she asked.

He turned his head slightly, catching her gaze, remembering the last time they’d danced on this very balcony and what they had ended up doing against the balustrade.

He arched an eyebrow.

“Is that an euphemism or—”

Isa let out a bark of laughter. “No, Reg. We’re abstaining, remember? Just a dance.”

Regulus snorted, then shrugged, taking her hand and leading her into a slow sway. For a while they moved quietly, Isa’s head against his chest, his chin resting lightly on her curls.

“You’re so tense, Reg,” she murmured.

He didn’t answer.

“I’m just… waiting for you to explode.”

He remained silent, just taring into the dark beyond the terrace while he swayed with her.

“Are you all right, Reg?” she asked at last.

“No.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.”

Isa drew back just slightly, her head tilting as a soft, wry smile touched her lips.

“You’re my best friend, Reg. You know you can tell me anything.”

He looked into the depths of her dark brown eyes.

It wasn’t true.

She *was* his best friend, but not only that. She was his fiancée too. And precisely because of that, he could most definitely not tell her everything — or at least not the things laying heaviest on both his head and his heart, not without doing irrevocable damage to their relationship. He could not talk about whom or what his heart longed for, couldn’t tell her about the dreams that kept him on such a tight leash to the things that he so desperately ached for but could never claim.

He couldn’t tell her of all his activities either. He hadn’t been able to in the beginning, when her perceptiveness combined with her disillusionment with their world had already convinced him silence was safer. Now, with the Plan, with so much — with *everyone* and *everything* — at stake, the need to keep her far from it all was even more pressing.

He sighed, heavy and sorrowful.

“I know, Ies. I know.”

Chapter End Notes

Poor Reg is absolutely going through it. So much is happening and he's feeling so many things and ohhhhh.

I know you've all been looking forward to the masquerade, but there were a few things we needed to cover first. Don't worry, the NYE Ball is coming up next chapter. Looking forward to it so much!!

(ps. why when i write kreacher he always ends up so much like sméagol??? or is that just me)

Chapter 10: Of Surprises & Masquerades

Chapter Notes

> Hii everyone!
>
> Yes I am ALIVE, and back with a long chapter for the weekend. I know many of you have been waiting for this chapter, and yes, very patiently indeed; life was living, chaos was chaosing and here I am.
>
> As always, thank you so much for your wonderful comments. Your engagement with the story is so validating and energising and really keeps me motivated to write (even if, like now, i barely have a minute to spare). You are all brilliant ♥
>
> And well… here we go. One of my favs, enjoy!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

New Year's Eve came faster than Regulus had anticipated. In the days between Christmas and the end of the year, he had willingly taken part in as many raids and missions as possible. He couldn't properly explain why, but any chance he found to volunteer, he seized with both hands. He was too busy, too antsy and anxious, and far too tired to really dwell on the reasons behind it, but he knew, somewhere, it was probably a combination of a coping mechanism — not to have to think about New Year's — and some sort of masochistic, half-suicidal desire to see James.

It would be *bad* — potentially catastrophic — if he were to run into James during some raid or attack for so many reasons. He couldn't betray anything that might indicate his feelings for or his past with the Heir to the Potter family, and well, he hadn't seen him in so long, had never felt so far from the person he ached to see more than anyone in this world, that Regulus didn't trust himself not to do something stupid when, finally, he saw him again, *felt* him again, in flesh and bone...

And even if Regulus could compose himself, could lean on his considerable ability to shut himself off from hard things when he wished to, there was still James in the equation… and James wore his heart on his sleeve, was on his best days already so much more of an open book that Regulus was on his worst. And this — the knowledge

that his former lover, the one he had called the love of his life countless times, was in fact a Death Eater — would break James's heart in a way not even the best Occlumens could conceal.

So Regulus knew it was in no way desirable to run into James anywhere, anyhow, but he realised, more with every minute passing, that desire didn't speak from the mind, but very much from the heart. And his heart… it ached for him, *ached* to catch his gaze across a room once again, *ached* to hear his laugh ring out just another time.

And then he'd ask himself —

Would it be worth it?

If everything came crashing down, if it all fell apart — would it be worth it?

No matter how much he tried to close his mind and body off from everything, his thoughts kept circling back to the Masquerade, to the Plan, and to James. The only solace in it was that at least he couldn't overthink all the possible ways he might end up dead by the turn of the year. There was only so much room left in his head, and on the rare occasions that it drifted to possible scenarios for the Ball and all the danger they carried, Regulus found a way to rationalise the ordeal until it didn't feel that daunting at all.

He'd managed to break into Hohenhain — one of the, if not *the*, best-guarded prisons in the world. He'd spent days impersonating a Guard, had gone to ridiculous lengths to make the plan work. Compared to that, Ashcombe's Ball was relatively easy to infiltrate. Just a mole in the right place, and a group of Death Eaters could easily get in without being so much as identified — because, well, it was a masquerade after all. And yes, it would be, like Hohenhain, probably swarming with Aurors, but most of them would be off duty and half-plastered — it *was* New Year's Eve, and the middle of a very nasty war. And unlike Hohenhain, he didn't need days of preparation to blend in, because he wasn't impersonating anyone, and with his upbringing, he already spoke the language of stiff, dull balls and knew a thing or two about dancing a waltz.

So, what could go wrong, really?

*****

The morning of New Year's Eve, Regulus woke after yet another sleepless night. He had no real recollection of what had kept his mind

spinning this time, but he vaguely remembered flashes of green light hitting Barty's torso, and the sensation of James's lips whispering against his ear. He couldn't dwell on the latter for half as long as he might have liked, because, unbidden, the realisation came that New Year's Eve was *that* evening.

And, well, apart from that realisation, there was Barty, forcing him out of it by all but kicking the door open and tumbling into the room with Evan in tow.

"Morning, sunshine!" he crowed. "Time to shine, Black!"

Regulus groaned at the sight of his far too enthusiastic friend, trying not to dwell on whom Barty himself might both want and dread to see later that day.

"Nothing gets Crouch out of bed before noon like the chance to infiltrate a ball," Regulus said darkly.

Barty threw himself onto the mattress beside him, laughing hard, Evan following to flop down on Regulus's other side.

"And nothing like the prospect of duelling some poor sods from the Ministry to work up my appetite," Barty grinned.

Against himself, Regulus snorted at Barty's antics.

"Breakfast in bed?" Barty offered.

"Why not," Regulus replied with a nod. "I'll call Whiskerley."

Not much later, they were all sprawled across Regulus's bed and the carpet, working their way through eggs, sausages, porridge and tea. It was unusual for Barty and Evan to pop by like that, especially in the morning, but Regulus sensed that Barty felt uneasy these days about the tension between the two of them. It was, after all, a tension that Barty most probably couldn't pinpoint or explain and that left him very uncomfortable. Regulus could pinpoint and explain it quite well, since it had everything to do with the show drift of ideology between them. The fact that Barty always managed to find a way to underline this schism so clearly in so many off-key ways — like proclaiming he'd love to kill his father or love to blow up a few Ministry officials — only added to this rift that very much existed but only Regulus could understand.

So of course Barty saw their first major mission together as a chance

to reconnect, thus it didn't surprise Regulus in the slightest that he'd turned up in his bedroom that particular morning.

And, truth be told, it was working somehow. For the first time in so long, it felt… natural. Natural and light and almost *normal* — to sit there with two of his best friends, just bantering about sixth-year girls, Hogwarts professors and Quidditch tactics. It felt so uncharacteristically ordinary, so *cosy*, that Regulus completely forgot about that coming night's events, the war in general, and all the wedges that had grown between him and Barty. For a moment, it felt as though he had been transported back a few years — to a time before the war, before duelling Aurors, before Barty's unhinged remarks, and before a quiet fault line had been driven between them by a drift of ideology and Regulus's love for someone he very much was never supposed to love.

*****

The first dent in the plan came quickly.

The three of them went over to the Nott estate after breakfast. The Masquerade was still hours away, but Mr Nott liked to go over their plans a few more times and believed that creating a sense of harmony within the group before a major mission always led to people working together like a well-oiled machine. Regulus knew there was some logic to that — he had experienced it himself at Hohenhain, how important it had been to have a team that truly worked as one — though it didn't really dull his dread at the prospect of being stuck with Barty, Yaxley and Mr Nott in the same room. Yaxley always tried to rally Barty up, to get him excited and in the spirit of things, and Barty was always a touch too strange around Mr Nott for Regulus's liking — never hiding his admiration for Isa's father, and far too eager to indulge Yaxley's comments about Regulus and Isa.

Yet, this time, he'd turn out to be *very* glad to have been at the Notts so early. Or at least — that's what he thought.

They gathered in the drawing room, where they mostly lingered about, discussing some eventful raids from the previous days, the upcoming Quidditch season and their activities over Christmas. The older men lit their cigars over glasses of firewhisky, while Evan, Regulus and Barty stuck to the other side of the room. Evan was quiet, often lost in thought, a silence very much compensated for by Barty's rowdiness. The contrast between his two best friends couldn't have been greater — Evan sitting silently on the sofa, offering restrained

smiles when the occasion called for it but otherwise simply observing and idly twirling his wand, while Barty talked too loudly and cracked too many jokes with Yaxley. It was then that Regulus realised that both came from nerves — but just expressed in two very different ways in two very different people.

At some point, Barty and Yaxley got caught up in a playful duel, drawing all eyes their way. The older men laughed when Yaxley finally managed to disarm Barty, who then immediately launched himself at Yaxley in some sort of Muggle wrestling move. Regulus seized the opportunity and turned to Evan on the sofa.

“You all right?” he asked quietly.

Evan gave him a small smile — less strained this time — and nodded. “Yeah. Sure.”

Regulus felt a little out of his depth. Comforting Evan was usually Barty’s domain — or Isa’s — but he knew better than anyone that a few words of reassurance could go a long way before a big mission. He’d always received those from Lucius, or Thorne, or Mr Nott, and Regulus knew that Evan deserved them too.

“It’s all right to be nervous,” he said after a moment.

“I’m not nervous,” Evan replied quickly.

Regulus raised an eyebrow.

Evan huffed. “All right, a bit. But…”

“But what?”

“Nothing… Just got into a row with my parents this morning. About all this.”

Regulus’s eyebrows rose higher. The Rosier household was usually remarkably peaceful — he couldn’t remember Evan mentioning an argument with his parents *ever*.

“Mum doesn’t want me to go, you know.”

“Ah,” Regulus breathed, as it clicked into place. “She’s worried about you.”

Evan nodded. “Yeah, I suppose. It all got a bit heated — Dad kept saying she should be proud of what I’m doing, but Mum was

positively hysterical. That's why we came over to yours so early."

Regulus nodded slowly. "Well, it comes from a good place, right?"

Evan frowned. "What do you mean?"

"She's worried something'll happen to you — which, to be fair, could very well be the case. She just wants you safe, that's all."

There was a small pause. Regulus thought briefly of Evan and his pampering parents, something Evan had always been a bit ashamed of and lightly teased for. Regulus had never understood that. He'd have killed for parents half as loving as Evan's.

"You're your mum's world, Rosier," he said softly.

The words tasted foul on his tongue as he immediately thought of his own mother — of their last conversation, of her grief for a son who wasn't him. Of all the times she could have, *should* have worried for his safety, but clearly hadn't. Evan gave him a wry smile and a thankful nod, and Regulus knew that Evan had caught the longing behind his words.

"Thanks, mate," Evan murmured.

"Any time," Regulus replied.

They were pulled from their quiet conversation by the sound of Barty being slammed onto the floor, marking the end of the wrestling match.

Mr Nott chuckled from his louche chair, putting out his cigar with a flick of his fingers. "I think that's enough, Corban. We need Barty in one piece this evening."

A muffled, "I'm splendid, Mr Nott!" came from somewhere under Yaxley, setting the room off in laughter, including Regulus.

Then Mr Nott straightened, the amusement fading from his face. "Right," he said, his tone crisp. "Let's go over the plan once more before lunch."

With that, the atmosphere shifted instantly. Evan helped Barty to his feet and everyone settled down, listening to Mr Nott with full attention.

"We thought that luring Ashcombe out to the west quarter around

half-one would be the best strategy," Mr Nott began. "Everyone drunk and merry — and we figured that if they sensed any potential danger, it'd be around midnight. That'll have passed by then."

Regulus sensed it instantly — something in the tone, a faint shift — and his heart began to thud faster, his throat turning dry.

He found himself completely fixated on Mr Nott's face and words. The man's eyes — so remarkably like Isa's that Regulus could almost *see* her in them. The pepper-and-salt beard he stroked in thought, that small, knowing smile tugging at his lips — charming, but always with that dark undertone.

"But," Mr Nott continued, "we were discussing this further and realised the other side will think so too. Ashcombe will be expected to stay until the countdown, but after that… he might very well retreat. His duty will be done by then."

Regulus closed his eyes briefly, bracing himself for the words he knew were coming.

"So," Mr Nott said at last, "we've decided to change it slightly. The most likely exit route for Ashcombe is through the rooms east of the ballroom — so we'll do it there. Immediately following the countdown."

Yaxley gave a sly grin. "Three… two… one… Happy New Year."

"And *boom*," Barty finished with a laugh.

And boom, indeed.

*****

Regulus had a hard time pretending to be calm and composed as their strategising stretched into lunch. It had been so simple, so straightforward — he'd notified Dorcas where, when, and how they'd strike, and she'd make sure the Order found a way to muck it up. The plan had been so basic and clean that it was nearly impossible to go wrong — only possible, in fact, if one of the two fundamentals somehow changed.

And that was, somehow, exactly what had happened.

Regulus could have punched himself straight in the face for not knowing anything about the Order's plan in return. He had absolutely

no idea what they'd prepared, didn't even know whom they were sending in. The last time he'd spoken to Dorcas had been during the Hogsmeade visit, since there hadn't been much reason to see her since — at least nothing serious enough to do such a risky thing as meeting with Dorcas while every day he was surrounded by Revolutionaries for some raid, or Isa for company.

He felt trapped. All through the course of roast beef and chicken sandwiches, he felt himself being caged in with every minute that passed, robbed of more and more air with every bite he took. He knew he had to stay calm, collected, and forced himself to focus — to come up with a plan.

He had to notify Dorcas.

It was the only way to let them know about the change. Because as glad as he'd been that it was a masquerade — meaning they could sneak in without being identified — he now felt utterly betrayed by the same fact, since it meant he couldn't identify anyone on the other side either. Even if he *wanted* to alert someone from the Order once they were inside — not even considering the risks and complications of that — he couldn't. Everyone would be quite literally unrecognisable.

Fuck. Fuck. *Fuck*.

Alright, notifying Dorcas — there was only one way to do that from the Nott estate without drawing attention. He couldn't leave the ground and risk raising suspicion in case anyone suspected anything fishy about the night's events, so that left only one option: sending an owl.

So, as custom dictated, he waited until they'd finished the last course and moved to the drawing room to warm up with some duelling before slipping away under the excuse of needing the loo.

His heart was pounding so hard he could hear it once the door to the drawing room shut behind him, muting the laughter and chatter. He made his way silently down the corridor to the nearest bathroom, hands trembling as he Accio'd some parchment and a quill from Merlin knew where.

He scribbled the note quickly, coded as best he could manage, trying not to linger on how unsteady his handwriting looked. Then he rolled it up and turned to the most crucial, yet most difficult part — getting to the owlery unseen.

For once, fortune favoured him. Being at the Notts' was, in a way, a blessing in disguise. He'd been sneaking about this house with Isa for nearly two decades — he knew every shortcut and shadow, every creaking stair and every quiet one. He also happened to be engaged to the estate's daughter, which meant he could plausibly explain away his detour if anyone asked questions.

Not that Isa was around. She'd complained days earlier about having to spend New Year's Eve with one of her mother's friends, making no effort to hide that she'd rather stay home or at Black Manor. When she'd asked about his own plans, he'd tried to sound indifferent, though the curious glint in her eyes had betrayed that he hadn't quite pulled it off. She'd known better than to press, though, and hadn't asked further.

Regulus climbed the stairs to the first floor, then the second, where the family bedrooms were. He felt distinctly uncomfortable moving through the sleeping quarters, knowing how improper it was for him to be there. Even now that they were engaged, and even *knowing* — although he tried not to think about it — that Mr Nott was perfectly aware of some of the nocturnal activities that had taken place between Regulus and Isa, it was still considered rude to enter that part of the house, let alone sneak through it.

He walked quickly along the corridor, cursing under his breath that the stairs to the fourth floor — where the owlery was — were tucked all the way at the back of the third. Whenever he could, he stepped over carpet instead of bare wooden floorboards, praying they wouldn't creak beneath his feet.

Almost there. Just another turn, then up the stairs, and then another turn—

"Regulus?"

He whipped his head around — and found himself face to face with none other than Mrs Nott.

The blood drained instantly from his face.

"Mrs… Mrs Nott," he managed, voice trembling.

She looked at him in surprise. Her pale blue eyes flickered between curiosity and suspicion — and then drifted down to the note clutched in his hand.

Oh, this was *bad*. This was utterly, completely, bloody bad.

He'd been caught sneaking away from the drawing room — where they were all gathered to finalise one of the most important attacks of the Revolution — and heading, unmistakably, towards the owlery with a note in plain sight.

Why hadn't he pocketed it?

Oh, what a *fool* he was.

"What are you doing?" Mrs Nott asked, her tone mild but laced with scrutiny.

His throat went dry. For one terrible second, he just stood there — until instinct took over. The best lies, he knew, weren't the most elaborate stories, but the ones told with absolute conviction.

He was smart. He was the heir to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black. He was Regulus — soon to be Isa's husband, Mrs Nott's future son-in-law. Surely, if he *were* sharing information with outside sources, they wouldn't think he'd be stupid enough to do it so openly?

Yes, indeed — the best cover was to hide in plain sight.

So, he cleared his throat and straightened his back.

"I'm sending a note," he said, holding the parchment up — though he could barely bring himself to look at it, as if even his gaze might prompt her to ask to see it.

Mrs Nott's brows rose slightly. "Now?"

Regulus nodded, doing his best to school his face into a careful mix of embarrassment, longing and pride. "Yes. I'd hoped to see Isa here."

"She's at my friend Rosemary's with her sisters," Mrs Nott replied. "I'm only popping in and out myself — needed to send an owl to Damascus. I only trust my own to manage it properly."

He tried not to dwell on how *spectacularly* unlucky it was that he'd run into her during the few minutes she happened to be here.

"Yes, I figured she wasn't home," he said quickly, "so I thought… I'd owl her."

One of her eyebrows arched. "Is it that urgent?"

“Well… not necessarily *urgent*,” Regulus said, shifting uncomfortably on his feet. “But yes, I wanted to contact her.”

Her eyes flicked to the parchment again. He could feel himself shrinking under her gaze.

“What could possibly be so important that you need to send Isa an owl,” she asked lightly, “when you’ll see her first thing tomorrow?”

Regulus forced a weak smile, attempting to look bashful. “It’s not really important, Mrs Nott. It’s just… sometimes we, you know, exchange little notes — just to let each other know we’re thinking of one another.”

Her expression softened, suspicion giving way to mild amusement.

“*Oh*, that does make me rather curious,” she said, eyeing the parchment again.

Instantly, Regulus’s heart started to hammer again. He had to deflect — *now*. She could not, under any circumstance, read the note.

He gave a feeble laugh. “Surely you don’t want to read a note from me to my fiancée…”

A beat of silence followed, and then Regulus realised what exactly he had just implied — and instantly turned crimson. The very expression of embarrassment he’d been trying to fake moments prior now painted across his face for real.

“No — I mean — nothing, you know, *indecent*—”

The thought of Mrs Nott believing he was sending her daughter some secret, indecent letter made him want to vanish into the floor. But then again, that was still better than her knowing what he was *actually* doing.

“It’s just… you know how Isa is,” he stammered on. “She’s always a bit uncomfortable expressing her feelings when others are around. She’d be mortified if she knew you’d read one of my, er, private notes to her.”

Mrs Nott hesitated, clearly unsure whether to believe him, but looking nearly as uncomfortable as he felt. She coughed delicately. “Right. Well… I’ll leave you to it, then.”

Regulus nodded — perhaps a little too eagerly — and all but bolted up the last flight of stairs, diving into the owlery the moment he reached it.

*****

The hours until the start of the Ball passed in a haze.

They practised a few duels, went over intelligence and confirmed details, but apart from the catastrophic change in time and place, there was nothing really new about the plan. They would enter the estate through an Imperiused doorman and slip in during the brief window when another guard took his scheduled break, and the rest of the evening would be spent blending in, waiting until that fateful stroke of midnight.

Between duelling, discussion and changing into his finest robes, Regulus's mind circled endlessly around one desperate, *desperate*, hope — that Isa's owl had found Dorcas in time, and that Dorcas had been able to warn the right people in the Order.

He tried to let it go, tried to tell himself that he'd done everything he could, but peace refused to come. Refused to come in a situation where there were so many actors and variables at play and he was expected to deceive most of them without having any relevant information as to how to.

But, in a haze or not, and filled with silent prayers or not, time indeed passed, and before Regulus quite realised it, they were all gathering in the drawing room once more, eyes fixed on a small flowerpot perched atop the grand piano.

Rowle, Travers and Barty were discussing something off the side while Yaxley was moving methodically between them, handing out different masks, one for each of them.

As Regulus reached for his, he caught Mr Nott's gaze across the room. The man gave him a kind smile, followed by a firm nod.

"Another mission together, Regulus," he said quietly.

Regulus tried to return the smile but found he couldn't quite manage it, so he settled for a nod, hoping his eyes conveyed the warmth his face couldn't.

Mr Nott chuckled softly. "Starting to become the dream team, eh?"

Regulus huffed under his breath.

Mr Nott's voice dropped a little, a distinct note of sincerity beneath the ease. "Let's make sure we both get back in one piece, lad."

Regulus felt Barty and Evan's gazes flicking towards them, but Mr Nott didn't acknowledge them.

Mr Nott chuckled. "Merlin help us if Isa's left without the two most important men in her life. The world's not ready for Dora without her father and her future husband to keep her in check."

Regulus snorted, unable to help himself. Isa would have gone incandescent with rage if she'd heard that — and for that thought alone, he almost smiled.

"Back in one piece, then," he said quietly, holding Mr Nott's gaze.

*****

"Fucking hell, if I didn't already have enough reasons not to follow my father," Barty muttered under his breath, "these bloody balls would've done it, mate."

They stood side by side at the edge of the ballroom — a grotesque parody of grandeur. Draperies in all colours shimmered from the ceiling, and a faint haze of charmed smoke floated near the floor, concealing the dancers' bodies so that only masked faces rose above the mist, gliding and twirling over the dancefloor. Bars lined the walls, where bottles of champagne and crystal decanters of whisky were across the wood. Trays of hors d'oeuvres and bubbling flutes drifted lazily through the air.

They were, like everyone else, masked. Barty's mask was carved into the shape of a fox, whereas Regulus's was simple and black, matching the elegance of his obsidian robes threaded with silver. Barty, by contrast, wore a more flashy set of deep green robes.

Looking lazily at the smoky crowd on the dancefloor, Barty reached out and plucked a floating flute from the air. Almost instantly, Evan appeared at his elbow and snatched it abruptly out of his hand. He passed it to Regulus instead.

"No more champagne for you," Evan said dryly. "We're working, B."

Regulus didn't look but he knew perfectly well Barty was rolling his

eyes.

“Perhaps you should take a few yourself, Rosier,” Barty shot back. “Might dampen those nerves of yours.”

“Cut it out with the names,” Regulus muttered under his breath. “Both of you.”

Evan let out a slow sigh, gaze sweeping across the ballroom. “Nothing spectacular about it, right? Nothing we haven’t seen before.”

Regulus nodded. It was nearly impossible to impress him with a ballroom now — not after the annual balls at Dreadmoor’s Keep, a term at Beauxbatons, and countless soirées at the estates of half the pureblood families in Britain.

Still, it was a nice change to be unrecognisable at an event like this for once, not having to suffer through endless smalltalk and Cissy’s insistence on networking. No reporters following him around, chasing after a photograph of him and Isa waltzing in the middle of the room. Even if he wasn’t wearing a mask, the dancefloor itself was cloaked in smoke that obscured most of the dances from view, save from their heads and shoulders moving in and out of the mist.

Truly, to host a masquerade of this magnitude with this much anonymity at the height of a *war* — surely no one in the Ministry’s entire security department had seriously looked into this.

Barty sighed beside him, his boredom practically audible. His eyes flicked toward a woman lingering nearby. She wore a red gown and her hair was in a tight bun. The white mask glinted faintly. He coughed once, smoothed his collar and with a deepened voice to stay unrecognisable, called, “May I have this dance?”

Regulus couldn’t hold back a snort. Evan, in the meanwhile, stiffened beside him.

“He never takes anything seriously,” he muttered, voice clearly edged with irritation.

This was, of course, true — but Regulus found himself oddly unwilling to criticise Barty for it tonight. It was just a dance, and with this level of anonymity, there was no real danger in it.

It felt odd to be the one defending Barty for a change.

“Well,” Regulus murmured after a pause, “we’re still three hours away from… you know. Might as well have some fun, I suppose.”

Evan huffed. “Fun? Well, you know — I can have fun.” He turned his head toward a woman at the far edge of the smoky dance floor. “I’ll show him what fun looks like.”

Regulus blinked, certain he was missing the point entirely, but before he could say anything, a brisk, plump woman appeared before him.

“If you’re not going to ask me,” she said, “then I’ll just ask you.”

Before he knew it, she had taken his hand and was all but dragging him onto the dance floor.

A sudden wave of suffocation overwhelmed him — as if invisible hands were actually tightening around his throat. The moment the waltz ended, he all but fled the dance floor, pushing through the haze and out into clearer air.

He ended up on the far side of the ballroom, near the doors leading to the great hallway on the western side — the same way they’d entered in the first place. Just as he was trying to catch his breath, to steady himself, a commotion broke out nearby.

Two women and a man were in the midst of a row, the man insisting he hadn’t realised he’d been dancing with one of them, the other — his wife, presumably — arguing that their dresses were clearly not at all alike. A drunken voice joined in, making a crude remark about the wife, and within a second, wands were raised. The argument expanded quickly, as more and more guests got involved, until a few Aurors got wind of it, swooped in and fired red signal spark into the air, shouting for calm.

Regulus realised it was best to be anywhere but near that scene, so he slipped quietly from the hall, rounding the corner towards the lavatories tucked discreetly away. From the construction schematics he knew these weren’t the large, public toilets, but the smaller ones — which was exactly what he wanted.

He needed air, needed to empty his mind and steady himself for the plan ahead.

He turned the corner, pushed the door open — and collided, hard, with someone coming the other way.

The clash was so impactful that it sent both of them staggering back, and the mask of the person in front of him slid clean off.

And before Regulus stood the last person he'd ever expected to see *there*.

Regulus froze.

"*What the fuck*," he blurted.

Not the most elegant greeting — and definitely not the way to go if he wanted to stay unrecognisable, apparently.

"*Black*?"

Regulus didn't take off his mask, but as the man straightened, meeting his eyes through the narrow slits, he knew there was no way to get out of this now.

"Davies."

Isa's ex-lover. The great love of her life she was never meant to have. The man she'd have married, if she'd been allowed.

Davies had one hand buried in his pocket, undoubtedly on his wand. His striking green eyes were fixed on Regulus, wary and sharp, caught somewhere between anger and unease. He looked older than he had the last time Regulus had seen him — which was fair enough, given the years that had passed and the fact they were in the middle of a war.

Then the realisation hit.

"Oh, for *fuck's* sake," Regulus hissed. "Didn't I tell you to stay out of all this?"

Davies clearly also visibly remembered the last time they'd talked to each other — when Regulus had rescued him out of Bellatrix's basement and had sent him to the Potters. He'd very clearly demanded Isa's lover to stay away from the war, and, in retrospect, Isa's father. If Davies was ever caught by the wrong people… if anyone ever made him talk… the damage he could do to Regulus was catastrophic.

"Oh yes, yes," Davies shot, and the fact that his voice was so low and smooth made Regulus's dislike for the bloke grow unreasonably. "You told me to stay hidden, not to risk falling into the wrong hands and

letting anyone find out about our little secret."

Regulus rolled his eyes with a sharp grunt.

Davies gave him a sarcastic smile, one brow lifting in open challenge. "Though I'd say you've got a rather more… significant secret yourself, haven't you?"

Regulus shot him a very cold glare. Of all the men Isa could have fallen for…. Yes, sure, Davies was objectively handsome, and had that whole artistic, romantic air to him, but Regulus did *not* like him.

Regulus shot him a rather weak, "Yes."

Davies tilted his head. "Well, I was in hiding at the Potters' for a while, and… they're fairly persuasive, aren't they? Besides, I don't think I really had much choice. Can't do a lot as a halfblood these days."

Regulus found that unnecessarily defeatist. There were still enough halfbloods in key positions, after all. Davies wasn't Muggleborn, so it wasn't as though there was no path for him. He tried very hard not to think about the absurdity of the Dark Lord himself being one.

A tense silence settled between them.

"So," Davies said at last, "you're marrying her."

Regulus answered with another weak, "Yes."

"She know about him?"

"Yes."

Davies blinked, clearly thrown. "And she's… all right with that?"

Davies clearly did not understand there was nothing much consensual about this. No matter how big Isa's issue with James, there was quite literally no way out of this. Still, Regulus wasn't about to spell out the fact that Isa would much rather marry Davies. Pride was a strange thing.

A sudden burst of shouting echoed down the corridor, marking the Aurors dragging away one of the rowdy drunks from earlier. The noise was drawing closer, and Regulus knew it was time to break up… whatever this was. Better to blend back into the crowd than be found in a private lavatory by some Aurors.

Also, Regulus was kind of glad this conversation was over. He wasn't ready to go into the reason why he was here in the first place and something told him Davies wouldn't be so daft as to believe that he was there invited by the deputy minister.

The voices became louder, and Regulus turned to the door.

Then, with his hand closing around the handle, he turned back around.

"Is my brother here?"

A small pause followed.

"No," Davies said eventually.

Regulus tried not to let the relief that washed through him show. He drew another breath, eyes falling shut for a moment — bracing for impact.

Oh, how he had to know… but how afraid he was of the answer.

"And he? Is he here?"

An unbearably long moment passed. They held each other's gaze, and for just a heartbeat, Regulus thought he saw something wry, almost sympathetic, flicker in Davies's eyes.

"I need to know," Regulus said quietly, his voice unsteady against himself.

The noise outside grew louder, footsteps and muffled voices now just beyond the door.

"Yes." Davies cleared his throat, his voice soft when it came. "Yes, he's here."

*****

The run-in with Davies had thrown Regulus completely off guard — there was literally no time, but there were so many things to untangle from that short conversation, and his mind just wouldn't stop spinning.

He'd lost his only chance at finding out whether the Order knew about the change in plan. Sure, he had no idea how he would've managed it, but if he hadn't been so utterly blindsided, so completely thrown, he

might have come up with some way to get information out of Davies — to learn whether the Order knew about the new location — without blowing his role in all of this. But he'd been too dumbstruck, too flabbergasted. And now the opportunity was gone.

And… Davies was part of the Order. Isa's great love — the love of her life — was actively playing a role in the war, was out in the field, was risking his life. He could die that night, right in front of him, and Regulus would know, and Isa wouldn't... Somewhere all the way in the back of his mind he realised that Isa would want him to tell her about their run-in, but… would he? Should he? There were so many secrets when it came to Davies… Isa didn't even know that her father once had him locked up in the Lestrange basement to sacrifice him as part of a dark ritual. Had no idea that Regulus had risked everything to save him. Touching the subject of Davies… it could make the entire house of cards collapse. No, it'd be better to not tell her.

And… Davies had seen him. Regulus knew that the information Dorcas pretended to gather on Regulus was passed on discreetly to Dumbledore. He knew that no one in the lower ranks in the Order knew that he was a Death Eater. Sirius didn't know. James had no idea. But now… now they would.

And then there was the most important part. The part that made his veins burn, that sent his heart racing in that conflicting storm of dread and longing and made it both heal and break yet again at the same time.

James was there. In the same room. At the same event.

Regulus was so incredibly torn. Torn between wanting to find him and knowing he had to to avoid him at all costs. It'd be catastrophic. He did *everything*, unbottled every semblance of rationality he could find, tried to use it as armour against a heart that refused to listen. A heart now completely blind to clear logic, deaf to sensible tunes.

This, combined with the clock ticking closer and closer to midnight, and still no way to know whether Dorcas had received his message, made that his nerves were fraying more than ever. When he ran into Mr Nott, he'd scraped together every last ounce of composure he had, and mercifully, they had parted quickly.

It had been much harder to shake off Evan and Barty, though, and Regulus realised he was utterly lost. Lost on what to expect from the attack. Lost on what to do with all these thoughts crushing him. Lost

on how to keep everyone safe — on both sides — while at the same time preventing the Revolutionaries from seizing Ashcombe without blowing his cover.

It was too much. Always too fucking much. Why was this happening to him? Why was it always him? When would it stop? When would life finally turn around?

He knew he was spiralling, knew he had to stop it before something disastrous happened.

He had been ordered to stay in the ballroom until close to midnight, he didn't trust himself with even a single drop of alcohol, and he didn't want to risk being too close to Evan and Barty, so there was only one option left. With great reluctance, he drew a steadying breath, straightened his back, and made his way to the dance floor.

A woman offered herself almost immediately, and it was in the middle of a sweeping waltz that he caught sight of a very familiar shade of messy brown hair.

His heart stopped.

His entire body stopped moving.

Oh. *Oh*. There… There he was.

The woman he'd been dancing with collided with him, but Regulus didn't hear her — her voice blurred into the background, distant and oh so unimportant.

And in that instant, he realised that if it came to it, there really was nothing to be done. No amount of rationality could stand against it, no armour was thick enough to keep out what was now spreading through his heart, his *soul*.

No degree of restraint could prepare him for the warmth that mastered him. And everything simply… happened.

In some strange, out-of-body haze, he watched himself take those fateful steps, walking the path of longing and ache, and it wasn't until he stood there, in front of James, that his soul seemed to enter his body again.

And for the first time that evening, he was glad for the smoke rendering them nearly unrecognisable on the dancefloor.

And for the first time in months, with the one half of his heart standing so close to the other at last, he felt alive.

James, of course, had no reason to believe that Regulus was there, and the mask he wore would keep him unrecognisable, so… he decided to indulge himself. Just once. He could dance with James without James ever knowing. Just one dance. Just to breathe him in again. Just to feel his arms one more time.

Regulus stepped forward, eyes fixed on James's gold-and-red mask, not daring to meet his gaze. He knew that if he looked into his eyes, James would recognise him instantly — could see through his very soul.

James's arms slipped around his waist, and Regulus's found their way up around his neck.

And *oh* — how warm he felt. He'd been cold, he had been hollow, dead. And now, at last, he was alive again — resurrected in the arms of James Potter.

He felt James draw him closer, a deep sigh ghosting against his hair. "Oh, Reg."

Regulus's eyes snapped open, his body freezing mid-step.

A small, breaking voice: "You… you recognise me?"

A quiet huff against his hair. "Oh, love — I've dreamt of these arms around me for months." The longing, the love, the pain in James's voice was unbearable. Regulus felt it pierce straight through him. "I'd recognise you anywhere."

Regulus's throat was too dry to speak, and he felt the tears sting behind his eyes. They kept swaying, his body melting into James's, until at last James murmured, soft and unsteady, "What are you doing here, Reg?"

Silence.

James's voice turned hoarse. "Does that mean you're one of them now?"

Regulus still couldn't speak — only a broken whimper escaped him.

Then James's voice cracked, raw and fragile, and Regulus didn't need

to look up to know there were tears in his eyes. “Oh, Reg… why would you do that?”

And even if he could have spoken… what could he have said? James had no idea that Regulus had been part of the Revolutionaries for years now. All those times they’d been together and he had been a Revolutionary, all those times he’d slept in his arms, while his bore the Mark.

Did he tell him? That he once believed in what the Revolution stood for? But that it had turned into something else? That it had turned against him? That life had oh-so clearly turned against him the moment he was born?

He did manage to find his voice eventually, but no substantial words came out.

“It’s… complicated, Jame.”

A broken whimper left James’s throat.

“Are you… safe, then?” he whispered. “Please be safe.”

Regulus did everything not to think of the Plan, of how the future of the wizarding world may be resting in his hands. Did everything to not think of all the things that might happen to others, all the things that might happen to him if anyone found out.

James had been the only one who’d truly tried to keep him safe. Who had known about all his ideas and ideals and flaws, and had never given up on trying to keep him safe.

“I’m trying to be,” Regulus managed.

James nodded against his head. His breath trembled. Then, softly, near his ear —“Can you promise me something, Reg?”

Regulus nodded, although he knew that of everything slipping out of his control these days, promises might be the last thing he’d be able to keep.

“The pins,” James murmured. “Can you… touch yours every night?”

Regulus’s breath caught. He instantly thought of the golden Snitch lapel pin James had given him two Christmases ago — its counterpart a Quaffle, worn by James. The pins that, when touched by one of

them, would glow warm, sending a message that the other was thinking of him.

James hesitated, voice stumbling. “I mean… or every other night. Just until the war’s over and I— I know you’re safe and—”

Regulus silenced him with a hand at the back of his neck, whispering against his skin, “Okay, Jame. I will. Every night.”

He felt James melt in relief.

Here they were, in the middle of a war. And instead of berating him for standing on the other side of it, or for being engaged to someone else, James was here, holding him, asking only whether he was safe.

And how that warmed and broke him at the same time.

They swayed for a while in which Regulus completely lost track of everything and anyone but James and the sensation of being, at last, in his arms again. But at some point, the realisation where they were and why they were there, returned.

“Can you promise me something in return?” Regulus asked, his voice so quiet it was barely more than a breath.

James hummed against his ear, the sound muffled and warm. His hand traced slow, lazy circles along the small of Regulus’s back as they swayed together, unhurried, as though the world beyond them didn’t exist at all.

“Mmh,” he murmured, utterly relaxed. “What is it?”

“Can you promise me not to go to the east wing tonight?”

A long pause. Then a sigh — deep and resigned — the breath ghosting over Regulus’s neck and leaving goosebumps in its wake.

“I can promise you not to go to the northern one,” James said softly. “Or the western one. Or the southern one.”

Another sigh.

“But I can’t promise you not to go to the eastern one, Reg.”

Regulus exhaled, the sound trembling. He should have known better — of course it was futile to think he could keep James out of the fire. He was a Potter, a Gryffindor, the embodiment of everything reckless,

noble and brave.

But then another realisation struck him.

James *knew*. James knew the attack would take place in the rooms east of the ballroom. The Order *knew*.

Dorcas had received his message.

Relief crashed over him so suddenly it left his knees weak. He felt his body soften, almost collapse, into James's arms. He tried to push down the dread, the guilt, the sharp stab of fear at the thought of James being there, and instead forced himself to focus on the one piece of good in all of it — this part of the plan had worked.

So he let himself have this — just this. He breathed in that scent he had missed so much. Clung to the only arms that could ground him in this world. Listened to the steady pulse in James's neck — the pulse of the only heart in the world that mattered.

After a long while, James spoke again, his voice quiet and wistful. "I wish we could take the masks off."

Regulus's throat ached. "Don't, James," he said, hoarse.

"Why not?"

Because I might just kiss you.

"It's better that way."

James sighed — a long, burdened sound that felt like it came from somewhere deep in his chest.

Then, things happened quickly.

A sudden stir moved through the ballroom. Voices rose, laughter spread, and a hum of excitement rippled through the crowd.

"...Ten… nine… eight…"

Regulus stiffened, but James only drew him closer — as if trying to fuse them together, to keep them there, safe and still against him.

"...Seven… six… five…"

It all went too fast for Regulus to make sense of it. Between the

sudden change in the plan, trying to find a way to contact Dorcas, running into Davies and now… being held by James — he couldn't make sense of it. His brain couldn't catch up just yet. And how he needed it right now…

"…four…three…"

Something was off. Something wasn't right. He could *feel* it — a discordant note humming beneath the noise. But what? He needed to pinpoint it, needed to—

"…two…one…"

"Happy new year, love," James whispered against his ear, and with the lips moving against the skin there, it felt like a tender kiss.

Just a ghost of a kiss, and all the nights he'd dreamt of James's lips against him couldn't compare.

"Happy new year, Jame," he whispered back, closing his eyes in an attempt to lose the unbearable sting behind his eyes.

But then they snapped open.

He froze. Pulled back.

"James… it's… midnight."

Amusement coloured James's voice as he gestured toward the crowd, where cheers and shouts rang out, celebrating the start of the new year. "Yes, clearly."

But… he *knew*. The Order knew about the new location… But James was here…

Oh no. Oh *no*.

They knew about the new location… But they didn't know about the new time.

Utter panic surged through him, sharp and suffocating. His stomach turned cold.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

"I need to go," he breathed, already breaking away, shoving through the mass of dancers, pushing toward the eastern side of the ballroom.

The most likely exit route for Ashcombe is through the rooms east of the ballroom — so we'll do it there. Immediately following the countdown.

Shit. *Shit*. He was too late. Midnight. It was midnight —

Fuck.

Blood roared in his ears, drowning out all sounds but the beating of his heart that echoed like a drum.

Immediately following the countdown.

When he burst into the long hallway, the battle had already begun.

Spells streaked through the air, colliding in bursts and thundering clashes. The smell of smoke and burning silk filled his lungs, making his stomach clench instantly. Tens of people were duelling, fighting, almost none of them identifiable with their masks.

"Where the fuck were you?" Barty shouted, appearing beside him, eyes wild through the mask.

"Sorry — I ran into— I got held back—"

"Well get the fuck here, it's a fucking ambush!"

"Ambush?"

Rowle's voice came from somewhere through the haze: "Too much security — Aurors everywhere! And we think Dumbledore's lot are here too—"

A deafening explosion cut him off. The wall beside them crumbled, sending shards of stone flying. Regulus barely managed to throw himself aside before it came crashing down.

He'd never seen such chaos on a battlefield.

It was Aurors against the Order, Order against the Revolutionaries, Revolutionaries against Aurors, Revolutionaries against the Order…

It was complete mayhem.

Regulus caught sight of Davies among the Order, duelling furiously beside two Aurors shielding Ashcombe. Yaxley and Travers were trying to break through their defences, and a few spells exploded against the marble columns behind them.

Regulus instantly threw himself into the fray. Barty and Evan needed cover as they battled three attackers at cone, and Regulus threw one of them off with a binding curse. He *felt* the spells, the curses scream past his ears, but he managed to dodge them. Then another explosion hit the hall, and two of the Aurors guarding Ashcombe went down hard.

A man and a woman from the Order turned on him next. He found himself oddly wondering who they were — were they someone he knew? Friends of James's? Could the man be Lupin, or Pettigrew? The man's hair moved too fast for Regulus to identify him — and besides, he couldn't think about it now.

He ducked another nasty curse from the woman and sent a stunner in return. Miraculously, it hit her, and she collapsed. Another hex brushed past his own ribs, too far to really hit but close enough to brush him, and it was enough to send searing pain tearing through his side. He stumbled, the rush in his ears more deafening than ever before, and he felt the warmth of the blood spreading through his robes.

"Fuck— *fuck*—" he hissed between his teeth.

"Just two Aurors left and we get out of here!" Mr Nott's voice rang out from somewhere through the haze. "Stick together for the Portkey now!"

Regulus parried another spell from the man, forcing him back step by step while edging closer to Mr Nott. Suddenly, another Auror went down under a flash of green, and Regulus realised that Ashcombe's defences were collapsing in front of him.

Just one left. One Auror, and the Revolutionaries would have him.

He had to stop it. They couldn't take Ashcombe.

But how? How to stop them without giving himself away? How to sabotage this without giving away his betrayal?

He managed to block another hex and refused to acknowledge the pain shooting through his side as his heart hammered.

Then, all of a sudden, a massive explosion tore through the hall, purple and blue light blooming outward like a storm. The floor shook violently, and the ceiling started to crack.

Time seemed to slow.

Chunks of stone and glittering shards of glass began to rain down.

“Gotta go now!” Mr Nott shouted over the roar. “I’m lifting the blocks on the Portkey!”

He had no idea how, but somehow, through the chaos, Regulus managed to grab hold of Barty and Evan, dragging them closer. Dust and smoke started to fill his lungs, and he coughed violently.

“Where’s the rest?” he shouted hoarsely. “Where’s Yaxley—”

“He’s here — we have to go *now!*” Mr Nott yelled back.

Regulus’s eyes swept frantically across the collapsing ballroom — looking for Travers, for Rowle — and then froze.

A few feet ahead, through the falling debris, stood James.

Just a few feet too far.

Their eyes met. Gold and hazel warmth meeting blue and stormy grey.

And then the ceiling came down.

The chandelier broke loose — a glittering, *deafening* crash — and the world folded in on itself.

Regulus’s gaze stayed locked on James, and in that instant, the realisation hit. His breath was ripped from his lungs; his heart stuttered to a stop.

No. No. Not James.

NO!

Purely on instinct, he lunged forward, but a hand caught his arm — Mr Nott’s — and before he could wrench free, the pull of the Portkey seized him.

A violent twist, a flash of colour — and Regulus was torn away from both the only and the last place on earth he wanted to be. Away from James, buried beneath the rubble — bloodied, broken and lifeless.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaah. There's so much to unpack here. Like JEGULUS, finally! As you've probably noticed i'm a real sucker for tender jegulus and they were so sweet and tender here. James putting all kinds of issues (that others would've found so much more important) away to spend this precious time on holding Reg and making sure he's safe and okay, ahhhhh.

Also, Davies is back, finally! That's gotta be interesting.

And oh so much is yet to happen, can't wait to share it with you. I am sorry this chapter ended on a cliffhanger; the chapter got too long and this was the only reasonable place to cut it off. I promise I won't leave you hanging for long though, the next chapter will be up sooner!

As always,
Lots of love xx

Chapter 11: Of Stumping & Breakdowns

Chapter Notes

Hiii everyone!

Here I am, making good on my promise not to keep you waiting too long; another weekend, another chapter, and quite a long one this time too (10k+ words)

Thank you so much for all the lovely comments on the last chapter, they truly mean a lot. Life is starting to calm down a bit, so I'm hoping to return to weekly updates. No promises, but it's looking very likely. So, next chapter should be up around next weekend. ❤

xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Do you believe in soulmates?"

James lifted his head from where it was resting on Regulus's bare chest and blinked up at him, hair sticking in every direction.

"Like… not in the fairytale sense," Regulus went on, fingers idly combing through the messy locks. James gave a quiet hum, then let his head drop back onto Regulus's stomach, fingertips tracing lazy circles across his skin.

"I mean…" Regulus continued, voice soft. "Do you think there's only one person meant for everyone? One match that fits you perfectly — and the rest's just cheap imitations of it?"

James sighed, the sound muffled against his skin. Slowly, his fingers drifted lower, following the faint line of hair that trailed from Regulus's navel, stopping just above his hip. Instantly, goosebumps broke out across Regulus's skin. Of course, James noticed. He gave a small, knowing laugh.

"My parents met at Hogwarts," he murmured. "Got together right after, and — well — they've been together ever since. Each other's first loves. So I suppose for them, yeah, I do believe in it."

He shifted, propping himself up on one elbow, eyes warm and a little wistful.

“And they actually married for love. That’s not always the case, is it?”

Regulus huffed. He knew better than anyone that so often marriages had everything to do with politics and bloodlines and absolutely nothing with love.

“True,” he said, eyes on the ceiling. “But people fall out of love too. They marry for it, and then it fades. Does that make it any less real?”

James smiled — a soft, crooked smile that somehow always made Regulus’s heart skip a beat.

“Maybe,” he said. “I suppose it depends on what you think love is. Whether it’s meant to last forever, whether it’s timeless or whether it’s just… real while it lasts.”

He pressed a few small kisses to the place just below Regulus’s ribs, featherlight and tender. Goosebumps rippled down his sides.

Regulus looked down at him, at the mess of his hair and the warmth in those brown eyes, and felt the ache rise in his throat.

He did believe. He believed there was one person for everyone — one soul that matched yours so perfectly it made you more yourself — the best version of yourself — more than you’d even been before.

And somehow, impossibly, Regulus had found his.

The universe had wanted to throw them together. Against every odd and every rule, against every schism and war beyond these walls, the universe had been stubbornly, mercilessly persistent.

Yes, James Potter was his true and only love.

And how that was both beautiful and devastating…

Regulus’s eyes softened as he looked down at him — at James watching him quietly, gaze so warm and loving.

“I think so,” Regulus whispered. “I think there’s one true love for everyone.”

James moved then, shifting up until he was above him — a bundle of warmth and bare skin towering over him. His hands bracketed Regulus’s sides, thumbs brushing the sharp lines of his ribs. He pressed a soft kiss to Regulus’s jaw, then another to his throat.

Instantly, goosebump flared again, and he felt that familiar telltale heat stirring in his chest, then low in his stomach.

Then James's lips brushed his ear, his voice a whisper.

"I know it exists, Reg. I'm kissing him right now."

*****

"Alright, lads — as discussed, off to my place—"

"Where's Travers?"

"No need to worry about that now, Crouch. The main thing is that you're all checked out—"

"He's dead, B. I — I saw him take a curse just —"

"Debrief'll follow, Rosier, but now the—"

"Rowle too. Dropped dead right in front of me."

"It was an *ambush* — they — *fuck* — you reckon they knew?"

"Check-up first, Crouch!"

"And *fuck*, Yaxley got hit bad too — you sure they can patch him up? He looked… he looked—"

"Dead."

"He's not dead, Crouch. Got it bad, aye, but it's not a lost cause."

"You see what happened to him, B?"

"Nope. Too bloody busy saving our arses when that fucking ceiling came down. How about you, Black? Any idea what happened to Yaxley?"

"Yeah, Reg — you saw it happen, by any chance?"

"Joee— earth to Black!"

"Reg? You alright?"

"Black?"

"I think he's… in shock, B."

“Regulus? You alright, lad?”

“He looks pale — are we sure he wasn’t hit by some curse?”

“Reg? *Reg*?”

“Alright, that’s it — off to my estate, now. Let’s get everyone checked out.”

*****

Coming from the ball, Ashcombe had been shifted off to Bellatrix’s basement at once, and Yaxley had been rushed to an improvised hospital room upstairs. The rest was better off than him, but none had escaped unscathed. Barty’s face and hands were caked with blood, and he’d taken a few nasty curses to the back. Evan’s wrist and several ribs were broken. Mr Nott insisted he was fine, but no one missed the limp in his gait, or the way he winced and clutched his head every time he turned too sharply.

Regulus’s gash at his side had stopped bleeding, though he was certain he’d lost a dangerous amount of blood. His head throbbed as if it might split open, and there was a deep cut along his cheek — already swollen and not looking good in the slightest.

Not that he felt a thing — at least not at first.

He’d arrived at the Notts’ completely numb, detached, dizzy — silent. Everything he did seemed to happen at a distance, as though done by someone else. He spoke when spoken to, sat when told, drank when offered, nodded when expected. But it was all… unreal. As though he were watching someone else’s life unfold from behind glass. Even when Cissy came rushing in, fussing and fretting, he just let it all wash past him.

He’d seen more terror and trauma in less than two decades than most men endured in a lifetime. From what his governor had done to him in childhood, to enduring Bellatrix’s psychological cruelty, and living beneath Mother’s crushing expectations — and all the people he’d killed, all the people he’d seen die…

But this — this was beyond even that. His mind refused to process it. His heart refused to feel it. His soul simply could not bear it.

To see the love of your life buried beneath rubble — not knowing whether he lived or died, utterly helpless to change the outcome…

No, it was too much.

So his mind protected him. It shielded him from the truth for as long as it could, before it would inevitably all come crashing down. But even through the fog of shock, he could sense it — that fear of the moment when reality would finally catch him. The dread of how hard he would break when it did.

And boy, how it did…

It hit like a violent undertow — a whirlpool of grief and panic tearing through his chest. James's eyes — the light in them going out. His body folding, knees giving way, the crash as he hit the ground.

Regulus felt it all again, all at once, so vividly it stole his breath. His hands began to tremble and his vision blurred. He turned extremely light-headed.

He had to get a hold of himself. He couldn't fall apart here — not in front of everyone. Oh, he needed to leave, to *think,* to breathe…

He rose from his chair, his heart pounding and feeling *so* restless. He felt like he could drop dead any minute and fly the longest Quidditch game at the same time.

Just then, Mrs Nott and Isa entered — both in nightrobes, clearly woken by the commotion. Isa's eyes swept across the room, taking in the state of the men before her: her father, pale and exhausted, being immediately fussed over by her mother; Barty and Evan slumped on the sofa, heads tilted back, both covered in bandages; and Regulus — ghostly pale, the cut on his cheek still very apparent.

"I've got to go," Regulus said. "Need some sleep."

"You can sleep here, lad," said Mr Nott quietly.

Mrs Nott added, "Sable's made up the guest room for you, Regulus."

Regulus pointedly avoided Isa's gaze and was glad to turn to her mother instead. "That's very kind," he said evenly, "but I'd rather sleep at Black Manor."

Mr and Mrs Nott exchanged a glance.

"I'm fine," Regulus added quickly. "Really. And Barty and Evan should go home to Mrs Rosier — she'll be beside herself if they don't."

It was then that Mr Nott, for the first time since she'd entered, looked at his daughter.

Oh no. He could feel it coming — he didn't want this, did *not*—

"I'm coming with," Isa said at once.

Regulus still didn't look at her. He turned to her father instead. "That's not necessary."

But Mr Nott's voice was firm. "No, Regulus. Either she goes with you — or you stay here. It's better not to be alone tonight."

Silence.

Regulus knew it was a lost battle. He had to get out of there — had to think… strategise… had to come up with a bloody plan as soon as possible.

There was literally no time for all this.

So, trying not to show his frustration, he gave a small nod. "Alright," he said quietly. "Goodnight, then."

And with that, he turned and left the room.

*****

Very stupidly, somewhere deep down, he'd hoped his abruptness might have shaken Isa off — but he knew better than to count himself that lucky. And sure enough, barely a few minutes after stepping under the shower, he heard the door to the bedroom open in the distance.

When he emerged from the bathroom with the water still running down his back, she was standing there, arms folded, wearing her nightrobe and eyes red from lack of sleep.

Regulus ignored her. He crossed the room in his underwear, opened the wardrobe and pulled out a pair of trousers.

He could actually feel Isa's gaze burning into him. It lingered on the ugly gash running along his side, then on the bruises blooming beneath his ribs. He could *feel* the questions radiating off her, and the worry, the judgment, the curiosity… But he gave her nothing.

He couldn't. He just couldn't — not now. He was too tired, too utterly

restless, too fucking, out-of-his-mind panicked. If she got him talking… if she cracked so much as a hairline in the dam, everything would come spilling out — and he'd absolutely drown.

James. James. *James*.

With his heart pumping in his chest and his fingers trembling inconveniently, he dragged a T-shirt over his head, then a jumper.

When he turned, Isa had stepped in front of him, blocking his path, eyes wide and disbelieving.

"You killed Ashcombe."

He froze mid-reach for his socks. For a heartbeat, he didn't breathe, his hand frozen uselessly in the air. Then he continued dressing without uttering a word.

"I just heard it on the Wireless," she pressed. Her voice trembled. "Ashcombe's dead."

Again, he said nothing. He bent down, pulled on his socks, then reached for his shoes.

"You—" Isa's voice broke. "You killed the *Deputy Minister*."

Regulus closed his eyes briefly, exhaling through his nose, and crouched to tie his laces.

"We're not doing this, Isa," he said quietly, praying that the panic oh-so evident in his fingers didn't echo in his voice.

"What?" she snapped. "What aren't we doing?"

"I'm not discussing this with you."

He stood, then slipped his wand into his pocket.

Of course stubborn Isa refused to drop it. Sure, she was no modernist, but she'd always been very vocal about what she called terrorism — and presumably, killing Ashcombe during a ball on New Year's Eve, with hundreds of guests present, fell within her understanding of the term.

"You killed the Deputy Minister of Britain. You *killed* him—"

Regulus snapped. Why didn't she ever listen? Why couldn't she for

once accept it when he told her he was *not bloody doing it right now*.

“Oh, get off your fucking high horse, Isa!” he yelled, his arms flailing in anger. “Your own bloody father was there!”

“Yes, well,” she shot back, voice shaking, “that isn’t quite the consolation you take it to be, is it?”

Silence. Her eyes glistened. He stared at her — then looked away.

He couldn’t deal with Isa’s morality right now. Not her pity, not her judgment, not *any* of it.

Travers was dead. Rowle was dead. Yaxley was barely clinging on. The mission had failed — and spectacularly so. They’d captured Ashcombe, and Bellatrix had him now, no doubt wringing every Ministry secret out of him as they stood here.

He’d fucked it all up. Had completely, irreparably fucked it.

And Merlin only knew how many others had died. How many from the Order…

James.

Oh, how the thought hit like a blade. His chest tightened instantly. He needed air — need to *move*, to *do* something — anything. Anything other than being here and doing nothing.

“I need to go,” he said suddenly.

Isa frowned. “Now? It’s five in the morning, Reg.”

“I know, I—” He rubbed a trembling hand over his face. His throat felt dry.

Oh, he was so close to vomiting.

He had to *go*.

“Do you want me to leave?” Isa asked.

He shook his head, dragging his palms down his face, exhausted. “No. No, please — stay. I want you here when I get back.” His voice cracked on the last word. “I just need a bit of fresh air, alright?”

Isa hesitated, studying him, concern flickering across her face. Then

she nodded slowly.

He forced a thin smile. “I’m going to close off the Floo to anyone else, alright? Don’t like the thought of people barging in on you.”

*****

He’d been pacing for what could’ve been ten minutes or two hours — he had no idea. The first light of dawn had begun to bleed into the narrow London street, and the earliest commuters were already appearing. A milkman rattled by, eyeing the very strange sight of Regulus pacing up and down the pavement, and a handful of dock workers in thick coats trudged past without a glance.

Regulus barely noticed them. His mind was a blur. His chest ached.

He’d sent Gaius out the moment he’d Apparated here with strict instructions not to stop pestering Dorcas until she turned up at the café, which was, of course, still closed.

Surely Dorcas would know something. She *had* to. She’d have the answers — the plan — the next move. She’d have the solutions he was so desperately looking for.

He was halfway through another restless stride when a soft *pop* cracked the still air behind him.

Dorcas rounded the corner, looking positively deranged. Her hair was wild, her coat only half-buttoned and her eyes were darting around suspiciously.

“What the *fuck*, Black?” she hissed, storming over. “Why’s your bloody terror of an owl dive-bombing me in the middle of all this chaos?”

Regulus ignored her completely. “What happened?” he demanded. “What happened to everyone?”

She blinked, momentarily thrown, then exhaled sharply. “Come on. Two streets over. We’ll get a coffee first.”

“I don’t want a bloody coffee – don’t you understand!?” he snapped. “Just tell me — is he— did he — are they— what happened to them?”

She froze mid-step, properly looking at him now. He knew he looked completely out of it. The panic radiated off him, he kept running his hands through his hair wildly and his face was pale and drawn.

Then her eyes narrowed into sharp, calculating slits.

“Who are you asking about?”

Regulus shut his eyes, shaking his head slightly, his hands trembling in a futile attempt to pull himself together.

He didn’t want to answer this question. If he answered—

“It can’t be the Prewetts,” Dorcas went on slowly, watching him carefully. “Too old. You don’t know them. You don’t know the old guard either.” Her eyes slitted further as she tilted her head, voice dropping. “Is it… Davies?”

Regulus blinked.

Fuck. He’d completely forgotten that Davies had indeed been there…

“He made it out alive,” Dorcas said after a pause. “Barely, but yeah.”

Regulus nodded once, and silence fell. He felt Dorcas studying him — the twitch of his jaw, the panic still so evidently flickering behind his eyes.

Her expression changed.

“It’s not Davies,” she concluded out loud.

Another silence followed, and then it seemed to click.

“No,” she murmured, shaking her head. “No *fucking* way.”

“Just tell me,” Regulus whispered.

Dorcas’s brow furrowed, her voice both a whisper and a hiss. “*James*?”

“Did he— is he—?”

Dorcas shook her head again. She swallowed. “He made it out alive, Regulus. It was… really, *really* bad, but he’s going to make it.”

And oh—

The relief.

Regulus just absolutely deflated. The flood of worry and concern and panic seemed to leave him with one heavy, shaky breath, and he had

to brace himself against the wall of a shuttered shop to stop from collapsing from the sheer storm of emotions mastering him.

Oh — James… he lived. He *lived*.

He was *alive*.

When he finally managed to compose himself and looked up, he found that Dorcas was already staring at him. He almost jumped up in surprise from the sheer intensity of her gaze. He actually flinched under it.

“No fucking way,” she breathed, her voice barely audible. “No fucking way.”

He shrank instantly.

Shit.

Dorcas was still staring at him, eyes wide, shaking her head slowly. “Right,” she said curtly. “We’re getting some coffee.”

Regulus let his head fall back against the wall and closed his eyes in defeat. “I don’t want bloody coffee, Meadowes.”

“Oh, we’re *definitely* getting coffee.”

*****

They settled in a café five minutes’ walk away, which was one of the only ones open on New Year’s Day. It was a rather dingy place, tucked between two shuttered shops, and the smell of burnt toast made his stomach churn violently.

They sat in a corner booth, the steaming mugs fogging up the window.

“Regulus Black and James Potter,” she murmured thoughtfully, as if testing the cadence of the words on her tongue.

And then, suddenly, she burst out laughing.

It was so unexpected and loud that the waitress glanced over.

Regulus frowned. “What’s so funny?”

“Merlin, it’s cliché, isn’t it?”

Regulus's expression turned positively baffled.

"I fail to see what's cliché about this situation," he shot.

"Oh, come on." She leaned back with a snort. "The Death Eater prodigy and the modernist golden boy secretly in love. Or, well—" her eyes narrowed in hesitation, "—is it mutual?"

I know it exists, Reg. I'm kissing him right now.

"Yes."

Dorcas's grin faltered. "For how long?"

"What?"

"How long have you been… involved?"

He sighed, fingers tightening around his mug. He did not see the point in discussing this, but then again, he did understand Dorcas's bafflement.

"I suppose… about three years."

Her eyes widened so much it was almost comical, though this time, she didn't actually laugh. Instead, a certain graveness settled behind her eyes, as if suddenly realising the implications, suddenly realising what it meant for Regulus and James to love each other.

"Is that why?" she asked quietly. "Why you're doing all this?"

Regulus thought of many things at once. The Horcruxes, the Obliviation. Of the Revolution in its early stages and how it had twisted from what it used, what it was *meant* to be. And he thought of Isa, of Sirius, of James…

"Among others," he said, his voice low. "Yes."

Then, Dorcas's eyes went wide again, as if something had just clicked, had just fallen into place.

"Your brother…" she said. "He and James—"

Regulus winced. *Of course* the conversation had to turn this way.

"They're best friends, like… practically brothers."

The word *brothers* burned in his ears, and he shot her a tight, irritated look.

“He knew about this?” she pressed.

“No. Of course not,” Regulus all but snapped.

This made Dorcas grin, and though she clearly tried to hide it by biting her lip, her amused eyes very much gave it away.

Regulus was still somewhat riding the high of his relief about James, so he didn’t even feel properly annoyed by Dorcas’s clear amusement — or the fact that now another person knew about them. The fact that she was an accomplished Occlumens was a consolation. Besides, she already knew all the ins and outs of his betrayal of the Dark Lord, so the damage was well and truly done.

And, in truth, it was a strange kind of comfort, too — that someone could still laugh in the current circumstances.

Still, it didn’t take long for the conversation to turn heavy again.

Regulus glanced up and sighed — deeply and heavily. “What happened?”

Dorcas raised a brow. “You tell *me* what happened, Regulus. You pulled me out of the meeting, so I don’t have much. Surely you know more than I do.”

He hesitated. He had no idea where to begin — how much she already knew or didn’t. So he went back to the start.

“They changed the plan,” he said. “The day of the attack. That morning.”

Dorcas frowned. “*Why*?”

“They assumed Ashcombe would leave the main chambers after the countdown. They didn’t want to miss the opportunity — there was intelligence suggesting he’d move through the east rooms.”

Dorcas stirred her coffee absently, brows furrowed in confusion and concern.

“I sent you a letter,” Regulus said. “I assumed you’d got it.”

“I didn’t,” Dorcas replied. “I was out all day — heavily warded area.

Not even an owl could've made it through."

Confusion overtook him — what had happened? How did they know about the location?

"And you just assumed I'd got it?" she pressed.

"No," Regulus shook his head, the rising panic audible in his voice. "I had information you'd moved to the east rooms — I thought it was because of my letter, that you knew about the change in time too."

Dorcas tilted her head. "Dumbledore changed the plan. He instructed everyone to move to the east rooms — though I only heard that just now. Not yesterday."

Regulus's mind started to race. None of it made sense. *None* of it made any sense…

Dorcas sighed. "It was a bloodbath."

The image hit him immediately — the ceiling collapsing, the screams, the Aurors dropping dead on the floor.

His throat turned dry.

"Yes," he whispered.

"We lost the Prewetts," she said, and the sorrow in her voice made Regulus's chest tighten. "Both of them. And Benjy's barely hanging on... He's going to need more than magic to survive."

She went on — about the twins, about Benjy, who was apparently a close friend — but Regulus barely heard her. None of it added up. Dorcas was too lost in her grief to see it, but having learned, and now finally *feeling* that James was alive… It cleared a certain fog in his head.

And with that, the realisation formed.

His eyes snapped up.

"Why did he change it?" he interrupted. "Dumbledore — why did he change the plan?

Dorcas took a moment, then sighed. "He said it had to do with new information…" Another silence. "Fresh intelligence."

They locked eyes at the same moment.

And he saw the same dawning horror reflected in hers.

Regulus's voice dropped to a whisper.

"So there's a mole."

Dorcas nodded slowly.

"There's a mole," she echoed.

*****

They were forced to part ways quickly — it would raise too much suspicion on both sides if they were gone for too long — which meant they could do little more than promise to keep their eyes and ears open, and to contact each other the moment anything happened.

Regulus's mind was racing.

There was a mole.

Someone had told the Order about the plan — but not the *entire* plan. They'd known the location, not the time.

Why? How?

Who?

He Apparated back to the apparition point beyond the gate, then made his way into the manor through the quiet garden. When he entered the drawing room, he found Isa fast asleep on the couch — still in her nightrobe, slumped awkwardly against the armrest, her head tilted at a very painful angle. As always, her mouth hung slightly open.

Regulus sighed softly.

Of course she'd waited for him. Of course she'd refused just to go to bed, and instead had fought against the sleep until, inevitably, she had lost the battle.

A pulse of warmth and appreciation went through him, enough to be noticeable through the exhaustion and gnawing worry.

He stood for a moment, just watching her breathe, then exhaled

deeply, crouched, and slipped one arm beneath her knees, the other around her shoulders. She stirred faintly but didn't wake as he carried her down the hall to his room, wincing and panting from the effort. He laid her carefully on the bed and pulled the blanket over her shoulders.

For a moment, he just stood there in the quiet.

Then, with a long breath, he changed into his pyjamas and crawled into bed beside her — and at last, sleep took him, merciful and heavy.

*****

Since the Christmas break had fallen unusually early that year, they were due to return to Hogwarts only two days later.

The two days were filled with a haze of visitors. He'd been checked up twice by Healers, mostly to ensure that the gash along his jaw had faded enough not to raise any questions. Isa stayed at the manor as well, which meant that the Notts inevitably followed — her father to check up on Regulus, her mother to see her daughter off before term began. Cissy visited too, fussing over him endlessly and having Whiskerley prepare meals.

He knew Cissy meant well, but the fussing started to grate on his nerves. It became nearly impossible to hide his irritation — now actually flaring into pure anger and disbelief — when Cissy told him they'd held the debrief already and that she'd been so kind as to advise everyone to give Barty, Evan and Regulus a few days to rest, to recover properly before Hogwarts.

Truly, it came from a good place; Cissy was always trying to make Regulus's life as normal as possible, to shield him from things as much as possible.

But right now, it was the very *last* bloody thing he wanted.

Because he needed information.

There was a mole among them. Someone was passing information on to the Order and he needed, desperately, to find out *who*. And by keeping him out of the debrief, Cissy might've just robbed him of his best chance to find out who. The traitor would've been there. He could've studied faces, read tells, caught something — *anything*.

And now, again, he had nothing. Knew nothing. Was completely in

the dark.

So, he boarded the Hogwarts Express with irritation flaring in him. It was an all-consuming irritation, always bordering on fury, simmering just beneath his skin and ready to catch fire at the smallest spark — which had everything to do with the helplessness, the sheer powerlessness of it all.

He sat in the usual compartment with Barty and Evan, and it did nothing for his mood because Barty, of course, seized every opportunity to relive the attack in excruciating detail. And since they hadn't seen each other since, Barty found it absolutely necessary to express his irritation that Regulus had been late during the mission, although Regulus had already offered him the fabricated excuse of an Auror holding him up because he thought Regulus looked suspicious.

Regulus knew, deep down, that part of Barty relished the rare opportunity to have something to hold over Regulus's head, and that he was rather disappointed by the fact that even now, when Regulus had supposedly failed, he hadn't been truly reprimanded and was still so clearly Mr Nott's — and most of the old guard's — favourite.

When Barty turned to the other inevitable part of his rant — the absence of his father from the ball — Regulus had to actually bite his tongue to keep from snapping. Finally, he muttered something about needing to study and opened a book, staring blankly at the same line for ten straight minutes, not being able to take in one single word.

At some point, Isa entered the compartment and joined them.

Regulus didn't really understand why she'd left Amaryllis and Melania — who were sitting with some sixth-year girls somewhere down the hall — even more so because it was… uncomfortable.

There was little comfort to be found, after all, in the fact that three of your closest friends — including your fiancé — were responsible for a terror attack that had killed the Deputy Minister.

Not that he was dead, of course — but only they knew that.

So there was a rather painful stillness in the compartment, as if the realisation had simply settled over them. They were Marked. They were students at Hogwarts and Death Eaters at the same time. They had, only two days ago, pulled off one of the most consequential attacks in the wizarding world, had rewritten history, had entirely changed the course of the Revolution.

Because now they had Ashcombe. And with Ashcombe, it was only a matter of time before they had the Ministry too.

Isa understood the gravity of Ashcombe's death. Regulus understood the gravity of this new chapter in the Revolution's book. Evan understood the gravity of having played such a major role in his biggest mission so far — and the Revolution's biggest mission so far, too.

But Barty… well, Barty had a hard time reading between the lines of the grim, contemplative silence in the compartment, and just kept chattering on about Merlin-knew-what, not even caring that Isa wasn't supposed to know a single thing about any of it.

Isa sat down next to Regulus and took in the sight of her friends.

"Glad you're all properly healed," she said, a little stiffly.

Evan gave her a small, appreciative nod and smile. Regulus glanced at the scene from the corner of his eye but didn't contribute anything. He knew better than anyone that one had to thread carefully with Isa in situations like these, and he was, frankly, too tired to bother.

Barty, of course, wasn't on that line. He leaned back with a grin. "Thanks, Nott."

Isa raised an eyebrow. "You're looking awfully cheerful."

Barty smirked, then nodded, almost wistfully. "Yeah. What's not to be happy about?"

Regulus's hand, mid-page-turn, stilled. He drew a slow breath, then moved again, still not looking up.

The world was quite literally burning. The newspapers, the Wireless, the endless chatter — everyone was talking about the assassination of the Deputy Minister. Everyone was afraid, and no one knew who was responsible. Modernist sympathisers were pointing fingers at Revolutionaries and vice versa, and at the same time, there was another, rather logical question filling the headlines — how had this been possible? How could there have been such a catastrophic breach of security — at an official Ministry ball, hosted at the Deputy Minister's private estate?

The Ministry was in uproar, the Wizengamot in absolute disarray. From every corner came the hard words and the accusations, and

Regulus knew that those tried for the attack in the end would be nothing but scapegoats. He was sure that somehow the Ministry could turn the situation to its advantage; at least now they could clean house and silence internal opposition, all under the pretext of punishing those responsible for the attack.

The crowd at King's Cross had been smaller than ever, and Regulus suspected that even more students had been pulled from Hogwarts, now being tutored at home or just leaving the country altogether.

So yes — what not to be happy about.

He felt Isa stiffen beside him. He knew she was biting her tongue just as hard as he had earlier.

Barty, oblivious — or simply inconsiderate — of the atmosphere in the compartment, let out a gleeful laugh.

"History's being written as we speak," he said.

Isa looked at him contemplatively, her expression unreadable. She remained silent, prompting Barty to continue.

"It's beautiful, Nott," he said with a grin.

Isa cleared her throat softly. "You mean… the attack? The killing of Ashcombe?"

Barty nodded with a snort. "Not the attack itself, of course. But yeah — what it can accomplish."

Regulus kept his eyes on the book, but from the corner of his vision, he threw Barty a clear warning. "Barty…"

Barty rolled his eyes. "She's your fiancée, Black. The Revolution's Golden Boy's fiancée surely knows what happens — and why."

And oh — how Barty always knew exactly where to strike, how he always knew just how to poke at everyone's sour spot. Isa, who wanted more than anyone to be involved, to be informed. And Regulus, who went to every length to keep her out of it.

He had to give her credit, though. Isa stayed perfectly composed. She didn't even flinch. Instead, she gave a small smile, one that didn't at all reach her eyes.

"Of course," she said evenly. "So it was a beautiful evening, then?

What did they say — seventeen people dead? Even more wounded?"

Barty rolled his eyes again. "Yes, that's all very unfortunate, Nott. And I'm not saying *that* was beautiful, but it's for a greater — for a beautiful — good, isn't it?"

Isa's jaw tightened and Regulus could see her biting her tongue. When he glanced at Evan, his friend's expression was unreadable, and Regulus knew he was torn between leaving Barty to it and intervening, steering the conversation into a saver direction.

Then Barty gave another wistful sigh. "Still… I've got to admit some of the bloodshed was pretty, to be honest."

Regulus stilled again — the book frozen halfway through a page-turn — before forcing himself to move, to read.

"I mean," Barty went on, "to see former Hogwarts students there…"

Regulus's heart spiked.

What was he talking about? Who had he seen?

Davies?

James?

Oh, no. *No* — Isa could *not* hear about either of them. If Barty had recognised Davies… if he told Isa about it… And James…

Isa's voice came out hoarse, wary. "What do you mean?"

Barty shrugged, a twisted grin tugging at his mouth. "I mean there's a certain— I don't know — satisfaction to it, isn't there? To see James Potter die right in front of your eyes."

Isa gasped. Regulus's heart was pounding so hard it hurt. Panic surged, white-hot, washing through him.

He had to keep himself together.

Isa had to keep herself together.

She didn't look at him — not once. Instead, she asked, her voice pitched high and thin, "He… James Potter… was there?"

Barty snorted. "Yeah. There's something poetic about it, right? We

could never beat him here, at Hogwarts — the teachers' favourite, always the pretty boy, even our own Head of House was half in love with him. And he took the Cup, didn't he? But when it really matters…" He smirked. "We still win."

Instant rage blazed through Regulus — merciless and sickening.

Oh, Barty. His friend... Finding poetry in *that.* Comparing James's death to a bloody Quidditch match….

The urge to vomit rose so incredibly sharply in his throat.

He needed to leave. Oh, he was spiralling — he couldn't spiral. Not here. Not in front of them. He had to keep himself together.

He swallowed hard, voice tight. "Going to the loo."

He was completely out of himself on his way to the lavatory, and it was only until he splashed water on his face in the rattling, small room that he came back to himself a little. He noticed his hands shaking uncontrollably, and forced himself to draw a few deep breaths.

Barty had seen him. Had recognised James. Had seen him… presumably *die* there. And Regulus — oh, Regulus couldn't take it. Couldn't bear it. Couldn't carry the crushing weight of the two incompatible parts of his life colliding like this. Couldn't bear having it all spelled out — his *friend*, one of his *closest* friends, celebrating the killing of the love of his life. And Isa, his fiancée, who now knew, who'd want to confront him sooner or later, making it that much harder to outrun all the demons he had no strength to face.

He drew another breath and let his head fall back against the wall — once, twice.

Alright. He had to compose himself again. Barty was already harping on about his mistake during the attack. He couldn't raise any further suspicion. He couldn't let Barty find even a shadow of a connection between Regulus Black and James Potter.

He cleared his throat, ran a hand through his curls, and after another steadying breath, left the loo.

Just as he was nearing his compartment, he collided with Miller.

She grinned broadly — and before he could react, she threw her arms

around him.

Regulus froze, startled, awkwardly patting her back. He was not really used to Miller showing affection in a physical way.

“I’ve missed you, Cap!” she said brightly. Then her voice wobbled, almost tearful. “You — you — you gave me an owl!”

And in that moment, Regulus realised, more than ever, the infectious joy of Charlotte Miller. Because instantly, he forgot about his breakdown, forgot about Barty revelling in James’s presumed death and his subsequent stumping on Regulus’s soul. No, instead, he found himself snorting at Miller’s sudden, emotional outburst.

“Where are you sitting, Miller?” he asked.

“Just over there, with Violet and Denise.”

He nodded. “How about we occupy an empty compartment? I’d love to hear what you’ve been up to over the hols.”

Miller beamed her goofy smile. “Yes, sure, Cap! I saw one a bit further down — feels like there are fewer students than usual, don’t you think?”

Regulus swallowed thickly at the last statement and nodded.

As they walked through the corridor, Miller chattered on. “Sorry I didn’t write you with Nugget, but I’m just really— well, a complete disaster when it comes to writing letters.”

“*Nugget*?” Regulus asked dryly.

“Yeah! Cute name for an owl, right?”

He snorted again.

When they reached the empty compartment, he gestured for her to sit. “Not the best present then, if you don’t really like writing.”

“No, Cap,” she said earnestly. “It’s the best gift I’ve ever got. I can write to my friends now, get the newspaper… you’ve no idea what it means — that *you*—”

Regulus turned slightly panicked at the sight of an emotional Miller.

“Don’t cry, Miller.”

He tried very hard not to think of last year — when his Christmas present had brought her to tears, and how that had somehow led to the excruciatingly awkward revelation that she'd just got her first period.

The way Miller blushed a little told Regulus she was thinking of it too.

"I promise, Cap. No crying," she said quickly. "So… what did you do over the holidays?"

Instantly flashes came — Aurors dropping dead, his mother sobbing in his arms, his father with that woman, and then… James under the rubble.

"Tell me about yours first, Miller."

*****

If Regulus — or any of his friends — thought that the situation would get better over time, they were sorely mistaken.

The tension lingered, following them from the common room to the dormitory and into class. It was always there — obvious, heavy and unspoken, like an elephant in the room no one dared to acknowledge — and at some point, even Regulus couldn't properly explain why it was there.

All he knew was that the smallest things set him off. He had no patience at all for Barty's rowdiness or his blatantly obvious enthusiasm for the Revolution. And somehow, Barty seemed to sense it — only adding fuel to the fire, prodding every sore spot, pushing every button he could find. Regulus knew that this was simply how Barty was, that his friend liked to press where it hurt and that he grew impossible the moment he felt unappreciated. So, Regulus tried to avoid him as much as possible, knowing it was the only way to keep things from properly exploding.

That left Evan and Isa stranded in the middle of treacherous waters, trying to navigate without as much as a map or oars to work with. And then, of course, there was Isa herself — who had, quite off-key, learned that her fiancé's actual love of his life had died in an attack witnessed by both said fiancé and both their best friends.

She couldn't corner him on the train or in the Great Hall, but she managed to strike after dinner, when Barty and Evan were busy bantering with Miller and her two friends, and Isa all but dragged

Regulus into an empty classroom in the dungeons.

She closed the door softly. An incredibly heavy and painful silence fell between them.

Regulus exhaled slowly, eyes closed, bracing for impact. He knew what was coming, and he had no idea how to handle any of it.

Isa's voice trembled. "What… what… are you — are you all right, Reg?"

He let out a quiet huff, eyes still shut.

James, of course, hadn't died. But the only reason Regulus knew that was through Dorcas. He couldn't tell Isa that without admitting he had contact with someone who supplied him with information. At the same time, the thought of Isa believing James was dead made his stomach turn — because then there would be the soft pity, the compassion, the absolutely unbearable stares.

He ignored the growing nagging part in his brain that itched him to tell Isa that Davies had been there too.

Regulus would have wanted to know.

Isa would have told him, if things had been the other way round.

But somehow, he just… couldn't. He couldn't find the courage, couldn't man up enough to do it, to talk about Isa's actual love with her, couldn't let go of his pride.

And he knew it was a weak choice. He knew he was letting her down.

"Is he… did he—"

Regulus sighed deeply, then shook his head.

He looked up, meeting her eyes — so full of worry and raw concern that his throat went dry.

He had to say something.

So he settled.

"I… I don't think he's dead," he said finally.

Isa frowned, confused.

“He looked pretty bad when we — but Barty exaggerates. And surely if he’d been dead…” Regulus swallowed. “We’d have heard about it in the paper, or something. He’s the Potter heir, after all.”

Isa’s eyes glistened. “Oh, you must be so worried—”

Oh, no. He couldn’t do this.

James was a name, a memory, a *person* he’d locked away in a very specific corner of his very broken heart — a place only he was allowed to touch, on his terms, in his own time.

Discussing James with his *fiancée* — that was too fucking much.

But Isa didn’t seem to think so.

“I’m so sorry, Reg… I’m sure you’re right that if he’d actually died—”

“*Stop*,” Regulus said sharply.

Isa flinched, startled, staring at him in confusion.

He shook his head, dragging both hands down his face. “Stop, Isa.”

His voice came out rougher than he’d intended. It was low, hard-edged and commanding. Isa blinked, looking confused and even a little frightened.

“We are *not* discussing this,” he said.

She opened her mouth, but Regulus cut her off.

“No,” he said firmly. “I am absolutely serious right now, Isa. What happened, happened. I’m sure he’s not dead. But I can’t —” He felt the panic flare in him. “I *am not* discussing James with — with you. I just… *Stop*, okay?”

Isa stared at him — genuinely shocked — then nodded quickly, wordless.

Isa stayed true to her word and never brought James up again, though she couldn’t quite hide her furtive glances at Regulus, nor the quiet hurt that came with knowing he’d so resolutely shut her out of part of his life.

He couldn’t really blame her. She’d been nothing but supportive — compassionate, even — and genuinely worried about him. Many other

soon-to-be spouses wouldn't have been nearly as understanding when it came to discussing their partner's ex-lover, especially one who happened to be on the opposite side of the war — and of the same sex, no less.

Isa had, in her own way, extended an olive branch, and Regulus had burned it down. So, yes, she had every right to be hurt.

The only one, as ever, who managed to pull him out of his misery was Miller.

They lingered after Quidditch practice, her laughing as she tried to teach him a bit of Muggle football out on the pitch while Regulus made a complete fool of himself. They studied together in the deserted third-floor Charms classroom on the weekends. They were all secret, off-the-radar moments, hidden from the masses who might have something to say about Regulus Black being friends with a Muggleborn, but they were the only things getting him in better spirits and, in the end, making him survive.

Still, it wasn't enough. Even with Miller's cheerfulness and glee, there was so much simmering beneath the surface that it was only a matter of time before it all came crashing down.

The catalyst came, unsurprisingly, during a Quidditch victory party, which should have been, in essence, a joyful affair, but which never really worked out for Regulus that way.

It was halfway through February and Slytherin had slaughtered Ravenclaw on the pitch so brutally that, even with only half the season gone, the Cup was practically theirs already.

Outside the pitch, the winter was dragging on endlessly. Hogsmeade weekends had been cancelled for security reasons, which was definitely another blow for Regulus. He hadn't been summoned for a meeting in months, and the growing silence made him so extremely restless — not knowing what was happening and having no way of finding out… it left him feeling more powerless and useless by the day. But even if he *had* had something worth sharing with Dorcas, there was no chance of slipping away to see her anymore due to the cancelled village trips. And with the teachers hammering on N.E.W.T.s, and with every owl arriving with family letters or newspapers carrying yet more bad news, the atmosphere in the castle was beyond grim and dreadful.

So when Slytherin smashed Ravenclaw to pieces, it was only natural

that the victory sparked wild celebration — and that Barty and Evan, joined by the sixth-years, went all out planning the most outrageous party.

The common room was, as always, almost unrecognisable by the time they were done with it. Tables were put aside and piled high with drinks and snacks, the wireless was blasting music loud enough to make the walls hum. There was a strange sort of release in the air, as though, for once, everyone was just letting go of everything they'd been holding in for months.

Sixth-year girls were dancing on tables, Amaryllis had to actually threaten third-years with detention for sneaking drinks, a couple of fifth-years were in the middle of some ridiculous row over Merlin-knew-what, and most of the sixth- and seventh-years were at some point thoroughly drunk on the dance floor.

Regulus wasn't particularly enjoying any of it. He danced a few times with Isa, but he hated the excited whispering and curious glances that followed them as the 'engaged couple' everywhere they went. So he did his best to be there for his team, to look like he was celebrating, and to dodge the endless stream of drinks pressed into his hand — though, he had to admit, he eventually did end up drinking far more than he'd intended.

He also spent half the night trying to keep Miller and her friends as far away from Barty as possible. It hadn't escaped him that, for months, Barty had been… singling Miller out, and that she'd always looked very uncomfortable about it. Tonight he'd noticed Barty slipping the younger girls when the other prefects weren't looking and, well, the whole thing left Regulus with an uneasy feeling in his gut.

A feeling which, as it turned out, was very well-founded.

By the time the night wore on, Regulus wasn't in the mood for any of it. He'd had too much to drink, and he felt that melancholy surfacing. The part in him that kept thinking about the war and about James and that image of him lying half-buried under the rubble became louder by the minute. Besides, Isa was mostly off with Amaryllis and Melania, and Barty and Evan were with the sixth-years.

He climbed the stairs to the dormitory, complaining in his mind about having to brush his teeth and get into pyjamas when he was so bloody knackered, and then, suddenly, he was met with a sight he had not expected, least of all, had *wanted* to see at any point in his life.

Because there was Miller, on Barty's bed — with her shirt off, down to her bra and skirt, and Barty's half-naked body leaning over hers. The familiar drawl in Barty's low voice, both their hair a mess, that bashful, hesitant and anticipating look she gave him — it was so very telling of what they had been doing and what they were up to.

The door clicked shut behind Regulus.

Both of them turned.

All the blood drained from Regulus's face. Barty leapt up, Miller let out a squeal and scrambled for her jumper, her hands shaking as she pulled it on, looking utterly terrified.

Silence.

Regulus stood there, frozen. He looked at Miller, then his gaze shifted, slow and sharp, to Barty.

And that was it.

If Barty had looked even remotely regretful — or the slightest bit ashamed or afraid of being caught with one of his best friend's friends half-naked under him — Regulus might have found the strength to step back, to think.

But no, on the contrary — there was a certain gleam in Barty's eyes, one which Regulus knew far too well. It was the gleam of challenge and, beneath it, unmistakably, the gleam of victory, too.

Barty had wanted to hurt him. He'd known Regulus would never have stood for this — for him touching Miller.

But what Barty didn't know was that it went far beyond pride, beyond some possessive streak. He had no idea how deep that wound went — and no idea at all what he'd just unleashed.

Barty straightened, still wearing that twisted smirk.

"Oh, sorry, Black. Should've put an *Alohomora* on the door—"

He didn't get to finish.

Rage overtook Regulus. It was blinding, all-consuming, and it completely smashed what little restraint or common sense he had left. It tore through him, muting every part of him that might have called for calm or reason.

Before he even realised what he was doing, he lunged forward, grabbed Barty by the throat and slammed him ferociously against the wall. One hand gripped tight around Barty's neck, the other curled into a fist, and then — he was punching him. He punched him hard, mercilessly — again and again.

Barty made a choked noise, the blood from his mouth and nose drowning his voice, turning it into guttural rasps.

Miller screamed and bolted for the door, but Regulus barely heard her. He was far too gone, blind with a fury that had been festering for weeks, for months, perhaps even years. His voice broke out in a hoarse, furious roar.

"You absolute *fucking bastard!* You filthy, two-faced, fucking—"

Barty tried to shove him off, spluttering, but Regulus had him pinned, trembling with the sheer force of it, every repressed emotion tearing out of him at once. He was so fucking, absolutely *gone* he could hardly see straight.

The room was chaos. He could just make out voices — Isa, Amaryllis, Evan — shouting from the stairs. Then Evan was there, and he had to launch himself on top of Regulus to haul him back with all the strength he had.

Regulus staggered, chest heaving, heart pounding in his ears. He blinked, and when the red haze began to lift, he saw Barty.

His face was a mess. One side was swollen, blood was streaking from his nose and split lip, and absolute fury blazed from his eyes.

A second later, Barty lunged. The girls screamed, but Evan had anticipated it, shoving him hard back against the wall.

"STOP! ENOUGH!" Evan bellowed, his voice cracking.

Barty spat blood. "I'm going to kill him — the fucking *lunatic!*"

"I'm a lunatic?" Regulus snapped back, voice raw. "You're a *predator!* A filthy, manipulative, *sick fuck!*"

"Both of you, shut it!" Evan barked. "If you don't cut it out right now, I'm fetching Slughorn — and then we're all properly fucked."

That did it. The two of them fell silent, though both were still

breathing hard, trembling with rage.

Evan turned, catching Isa's eyes.

Regulus couldn't bring himself to look at her — or at Miller.

Isa spoke quietly, but her voice was firm. "Melania. Amaryllis. Take her with you." She glanced at Miller.

"Oh, no, stay," Barty hissed, his voice hoarse and bitter. "Let's see what Black here's got to fucking tell me."

Regulus gave a harsh laugh. The absolute bastard.

"What *I've* got to tell you? What *you've* got to say for yourself, you disgusting *fuck*!"

"Enough!" Evan snapped again, his voice cutting through theirs. He turned to the girls. "You — just listen to Isa."

The girls hesitated for a moment, but slowly left. Amaryllis took Miller by the arm and Melania followed behind, all of them looking pale.

The door closed softly behind them.

Evan shoved Barty a bit further back, holding up a hand in warning, then dropped it and pushed Regulus back towards his own bed, shooting him a sharp, warning glare.

Isa crossed the room towards Barty, drawing her wand from the folds of her skirt and gesturing for him to sit down.

Barty glared at her, jaw tight, defiant even through the blood and looking very much like he was going to push her away.

"Just bloody sit, Barty," Isa said, voice sharp. "Let me fix your face."

"Oh, undoing your husband's handiwork, Nott?" he spat. "See what a lunatic he is?"

Isa purposefully pressed her wand to his cheek, making him flinch. "He's not my husband."

"*Yet,*" Barty muttered darkly.

Regulus's ears were still buzzing with adrenaline, but the rush was ebbing now. His knuckles throbbed and he felt dizzy, lightheaded.

Why did he *always* go for his fists? Why never his bloody wand?

Evan gestured for him to sit down on his bed.

“What the *fuck* is wrong with you two?” he hissed at his friends.

“Ask *fucking Black!*” Barty shouted, voice cracking.

Regulus was up again in an instant, rage surging back through him. “*Me?* You sick *fuck!*”

“Shut up — both of you,” Evan barked. “Just — explain why the bloody hell you rearranged his face, Reg.”

“Because the *twisted fuck* was trying to *shag Miller!*” Regulus bellowed, voice trembling with fury. Oh, just thinking about him made him *blaze* with fury again. “Just to get a fucking *rise* out of me!”

Barty let out a hoarse, deranged laugh, blood still glistening on his teeth. “Oh, *fuck you,* Black. Not everyone’s fucking *universe* revolves around you, you pathetic—”

“Oh, you’ve given yourself away, you filthy—”

“*What*?” Evan cut in sharply, turning to Barty. “You tried to shag Miller?”

“Yes!” Regulus shouted before Barty could answer. “I found him on top of her!”

Barty scoffed. “None of your fucking business.” Then, with venom, “So what, Black? You hurt, are you? You harbouring secret loving feelings for little Miller?”

Regulus let out an incredulous noise — half gasp, half growl. “What? What the *fuck* — no—”

“Oh, that’d be the icing on the cake, wouldn’t it?” Barty sneered, laughter breaking rough through his split lip. “Regulus Black — against his will engaged to Isadora Nott, and secretly in love with Slytherin’s only *Mudblood.*”

Regulus froze. Oh, Barty was *so fucking wrong* about this — but how close to home it hit.

If Barty knew whom he *actually* loved…

At the same time, rage burned through him at how Barty referred to her — how he dared to call her that while she'd nearly given herself to him if Regulus hadn't interrupted. She would've surrendered herself to him in such a vulnerable and sacred act, and he had the fucking nerve to talk about her like that.

"Fucking hell, I'm *NOT* in love with Miller, you fucking idiot!" Regulus spat.

"The what is it, Black?" Barty shot back, wiping blood from his nose with a savage grin, while Isa ushered him to sit still so she could work. "Why'd you try to smash my face in if it's not that?"

Regulus was trembling again. "Can't you *see* this yourself, you *sick fuck?* You can't fucking see what's wrong with this?"

Evan, pale now, held up both hands. "Reg — calm down. Just — calm *the fuck* down."

Barty gave a hollow laugh. "What's wrong with this, then?" he spat, pushing himself up from the bed against Isa's protests. His eyes were absolutely wild. Isa froze, the panic flashing across her eyes and Evan instantly stepped between his best friends again.

"So that's what this is about, is it, Black?" Barty sneered, taking a threatening step forward, completely ignoring Evan's presence. "Our *fine, honourable* Regulus Arcturus Black — pretending to be above all this. So bloody *noble*, aren't you?"

Regulus blinked. He was definitely missing the point somewhere.

Barty let out a sharp, manic laugh. "You're not fooling anyone, Black. No matter what people think, you're just like the rest of us." Another bark of deranged laughter. "I've *heard* you shag Nott in this dorm. I've *walked in* on you fucking her mouth."

Isa went deathly still. Her eyes widened, horror spreading across her face. Regulus's stomach turned over and he had to look away from her.

Barty laughed again, voice rasping and cruel. "Ah — wasn't that the same night you smashed Crabbe into the hospital wing? So fucking dignified, the *holy Regulus Black* among us filthy peasants." Then he looked Regulus dead in the eye, lip curling. "So dignified — with Nott on her knees while you're pumping her mouth full of your—"

"*Shut up!*" Regulus roared, his voice cracking. "Shut the fuck up, you lunatic! *SHUT UP!*"

Barty only laughed harder, the sound making the hairs on Regulus's neck rise.

Oh — how *dare* he. How *fucking* dare he. Comparing something so intimate and consensual and, albeit complicated, *loving* between Regulus and Isa to… *that*. To trying to shag fourteen-year-old Miller, bordering on drunk because *he'd* filled her glass.

"It's not the fucking same, Crouch!" Regulus snapped.

"Why, then, huh?" Barty bellowed. "Because it's not the golden boy Regulus Black fucking his golden fiancée, Isado—"

That was it. Regulus completely lost it. How could Barty be so *fucking thick*? How did he not understand this?

"Because she's in no *fucking position to say no*, Crouch!" he roared.

A silence stretched.

Something visibly clicked in both Evan and Isa. They exchanged a glance and Isa gave a small, uncertain nod, but Regulus was too locked on Barty's face to notice.

Isa cleared her throat. Her voice was remarkably steady considering her shaking hands. "Come on, Barty," she said. "Let's… go have a smoke somewhere, yeah?"

Barty glared, breathing hard, but after a tense pause he let her steer him towards the door. He shot Regulus a look of pure venom as he went.

Then the door closed, and the dorm was finally quiet again.

Regulus dropped back onto his bed, feeling a headache rise as all of the night's events hit him at once. Evan waited a beat before stepping closer and settling beside him.

"He… doesn't know about your past, Regulus," Evan said quietly.

Regulus avoided his gaze, feeling his chest tighten at the mention of all the non-consensual things that had happened to him. Of all the times he hadn't been in the position to say no.

Like Miller just now.

He flopped backwards and pressed a hand over his face. He felt wrung and so hollow — and so fucking *tired*.

Everything was messed up.

The war. The Horcruxes. James. The looming wedding. Barty and his fucking parents. Miller under Barty…

Everything was so bloody *messed up*.

“Shouldn’t fucking matter,” Regulus muttered. “It’s common sense.”

Evan gave a short, humourless huff. “Not for everyone, Reg.”

“Clearly.”

“It’s not just that,” Evan said after a moment. He clearly avoided Regulus’s gaze too. “He’s… working through some stuff, Regulus.”

“Oh, yes, yes,” Regulus snapped, dragging his hands down his face. “His father’s fucking mental, his mother’s fucking sick, poor Barty—”

“That’s not all of it,” Evan said quietly.

Regulus turned his head to look at him. When he finally managed to catch Evan’s gaze, he asked, “What d’you mean?”

Evan hesitated, then sighed. “Nothing — or… well. No. Nothing. Just —” He glanced at the door. “Let him work through it.”

“Through *what*, Rosier?”

Evan gave a faint, weary smile. “Don’t give up on him just yet, Black.”

As if that made it any clearer at all.

“What do you mean?” Regulus pressed, but Evan only shook his head as he stood.

“Just… try to sleep it off, Reg,” he said quietly. “We’ll see about it tomorrow.”

Regulus huffed, sinking deeper into the mattress, the ache in his hand pulsing in time with his thoughts — the most prominent being whether there was any coming back from this at all.

Chapter End Notes

...alright.

So — a lot has happened, and there's definitely a lot to unpack. First of all: YES, thankfully, James is alright, and no, this doesn't mean you'll have to wait ages for new jegulus content, i promise ;)

Then there's Dorcas finding out… and Isa learning that James was there... so many shifting dynamics, so much drama omg. Honestly, it's always a bit of an art balancing all these characters' personalities and intricacies but it's also one of the most fun parts of writing this fic.

And of course, there's Barty. You might've seen it coming over the past few chapters, but yeah... here we are. I just want to say that Barty is a very morally grey character (as are many in this fic), and we'll see how that plays out. I like portraying him as someone who absolutely has a dark side, but isn't just darkness, if that makes sense. He's also going through it and while we don't get the full picture (since this is a pretty narrow Reg POV) we are starting to see the effects. But I'll leave it at that for now.

See you next week, and as always,

lots of love!

xx

Chapter 12: Of Infection & Improbabilities

Chapter Notes

> Hi there, everyone!
>
> Thank you so much for all the lovely comments on the last chapter — you guys are the absolute best! I'm actually managing to stick to my promises these days, so here I am again with a nice long chapter just before the weekend.
>
> I'm so excited that we're really in the heart of the plot now; sure, we're only 12 chapters in (so about a third of the way through), but things are definitely picking up and I can't wait to take you along for the ride.
>
> Lots of love, as always, xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The day after the party, Regulus woke up with a splitting headache and an overwhelming feeling of dread. His hand was having a race with his head in terms of throbbing, and flashes of Barty's bloodied face kept forcing their way back into his mind. He groaned at the memory.

Not that he thought Barty hadn't deserved it. No — Barty had deserved every punch, every drop of blood. If anything, he might've not had enough. The dread wasn't born of guilt, but very much out of uncertainty, and, in a way, out of fear.

Uncertainty, because he didn't know what would happen now. Barty was one of his best friends, and though things between them had been tense for a while, this… this had blown it all apart. He was pissed, *furious*, about Barty touching Miller because of the act itself, but also because of what it had unleashed; the inevitable blow-up of their friendship and, with it, an unpredictable Barty. Would he tell anyone? Would he tell everyone that he'd tried to 'shag some filthy Mudblood' and that Regulus had nearly punched him unconscious for it? Would he repeat those ridiculous ideas about Regulus having feelings for Miller?

And he was afraid not only of what Barty might do or what he might

say, but most of all, Regulus feared himself. Feared how little it took for him to completely lose control these days. Feared that he had no control over his emotions. Especially with his role in the Revolution and playing the Dark Lord, he needed to get a grip on his emotions more than ever, and this was a harsh reminder that he still had a long way to go.

He left the dorm before anyone else that morning, went down to the kitchens for food, then returned once everyone was in the Great Hall for lunch. He shut the curtains around his bed and stayed there, studying — or at least trying to — wanting to face no one, least of all Barty or Miller.

But Isa wouldn't be Isa if she didn't completely ignore his unsubtle attempts to be left alone. Sometime in the afternoon, she pushed through the curtains without so much as a knock and dropped onto the bed beside him.

Regulus didn't even look up at first — only flicked his eyes toward her, then back down to the parchment in his lap.

She let out a long sigh and stretched out opposite him, their legs brushing in the narrow space of the bed.

"How's the hand?" she asked.

"Terrific," he said flatly, quill scratching.

Isa raised an eyebrow and drew her wand. "Let me see."

He didn't glance up. "No. It's fine. Leave it."

"Ah," she said. "So this is your punishment, then?"

That made him look up. "It's not *me* who should be punished."

Isa crossed her arms, tilting her head. "So you don't feel even a little guilty?"

He caught her gaze and held it, not flinching once. "No. Crouch got what he bloody deserved. Taking advantage of a fourteen-year-old — getting her pissed and trying to shag her — why am I even having to explain this?"

Isa's mouth tightened, but she didn't argue. "I agree," she said eventually. "Completely, and I'm not excusing him." Then after a

silence. “But have you ever considered that Miller might… actually like him?”

Regulus froze for half a heartbeat.

He had not considered that.

The thought felt absurd — almost offensive. The idea of Miller having anyone she fancied was strange enough, but *Barty*?

He kept his expression neutral. “Even more reason to make it something special. Something memorable, and you know… pleasant.”

A short silence followed, Isa watching him with an unreadable face.

“Preferably,” he went on, “when she’s old enough to make such decisions, and not so drunk she can barely stand.”

He pushed down the thought that he could almost hear James in those words. Regulus had always felt it, but James had been able to articulate it. So well, in fact, that Regulus could now echo him perfectly.

Isa smiled warmly.

“What?” he asked, wary.

“Nothing,” she said, huffing softly. “Sometimes I just forget there are still people like you.”

Heat crept up his neck. He looked away quickly, back to his parchment.

“So,” Isa said after a moment, “you’re just going to hide out here, then?”

“Yeah,” Regulus muttered. “For today, yes.”

He really couldn’t stomach the thought of seeing Barty or Miller.

“Don’t you think it’d be better just to talk to him?” Isa asked gently.

Regulus shook his head, eyes fixed on the parchment. “No. I’ve got nothing to say.”

Isa cleared her throat. “You don’t think you can come back from this?”

He felt irritation prickle at his skin — she was pressing on wounds still far too raw. “Let it go, Isa. I’m not talking to him now. I just… don’t want to.”

Isa sighed, worry clear behind her eyes. “Alright, Reg. Just… I don’t know.”

“What?”

She shrugged, looking thoughtful. “I don’t like the idea of Barty being… too far away, Reg.” She paused. “I don’t like that idea at all.”

*****

By Monday, unfortunately, Regulus was forced to crawl out of his cave for classes, and as some of these, inevitably, meant being in Barty’s presence, he decided he might as well sit in the Great Hall for meals too. Neither of them so much as acknowledged the other’s existence, and Isa and Evan were, again, caught in the middle — pretending everything was fine but speaking with such careful civility that it only managed to further underscore how *not fine* everything really was.

He couldn’t avoid Miller any longer either, because they had practice that evening, and there was no way around it. She didn’t look at him once during the entire two-hour training, and Regulus felt hopelessly out of his depth — torn between the desperate wish to avoid the topic altogether and the painful knowledge that, at some point, he’d have to face it.

In the end, it was Miller who made the choice for him.

After the team had finished up in the locker room and everyone was filing out, Regulus lingered behind to gather the last of his things. When he looked up, she was still there — standing awkwardly by the benches, her hands twisting in front of her.

Instantly, the air grew thick.

“Hi, Cap,” she said quietly, glancing up from the floor.

Regulus cleared his throat. “Hi, Miller.”

A long silence followed. His mind raced, searching for anything to say that wouldn’t make it worse. The fact that he had to *search* — that it didn’t come naturally — made his throat turn dry.

It had always been easy with Miller.

That was her charm. She was unbothered, always cheerful, and a large part of the ease between them came from the fact they never ventured into the awkward territory of teenage girl woes he had no idea how to handle. Regulus knew he was someone people had to grow on, and knew that people had to grow on him, that there was always a certain unspoken barrier between him and others, making first exchanges often awkward and stiff. He wasn't naturally charming, or talkative, or particularly open. That had always been Sirius.

But with Miller, that barrier had crumbled quickly. She was easy to talk to, uncomplicated. The only thing that could ever make things awkward between them was addressing things that he had no idea how to handle, which, as it turned out, happened to be the idea of Miller having romantic feelings, let alone sexual ones, and finding her in his best mate's bed.

Too lost in that thought to speak, it was Miller who broke the silence first. Her voice was tight and high.

"Look… I'm — I'm sorry, Cap."

And before he could find any response to that, she burst into tears. For a second, he froze — then instinct took over. He crossed the room and wrapped his arms around her.

"Hey," he murmured, "don't cry. It's alright. It's alright, Miller."

"I'm so stupid," she choked out against his chest.

"No," he said firmly, though a part of him couldn't help but agree. But it wasn't what she needed to hear. "You're not. Just… be careful with yourself, alright? Keep yourself safe. And maybe… best to stay clear of Barty for a while."

She sniffed, looking up at him. "Are we okay?"

It warmed him that this was apparently so important to her — that she didn't want it to drive a wedge between them.

He smiled, a little wryly. "Yeah, Miller. We're okay."

She gave him one last hug before they walked back up to the castle together, slipping into the safer topics of that evening's Quidditch drills and bludger strategies, brushing past the much more

uncomfortable topic of the Quidditch party, pretending things were fine, pretending that, indeed, this wouldn't drive a wedge between them.

But it wasn't a promise he could keep.

Of all the things he would end up regretting doing, of all the things he already regretted having done, one of the deepest regrets would come from not dealing with this properly. From not telling her, clearly, that none of it had been her fault. That an eighteen-year-old boy she looked up to had no business being interested in her that way, and still less to act on it. That the blame never lay with the prey, only ever with the predator.

He, of all people, should have known that. Having been subjected to abuse for years, he knew better than anyone what she needed from him, and yet, somehow, when it came to it, he'd failed to do the one thing he himself had needed back then — to give it words. To name it, so that it became valid, so that it could exist and be faced. Instead, he buried it, avoided it, and left it unspoken.

Yes, of all the things he'd regret, he would regret that indeed.

*****

As February bled into March, Regulus grew more and more restless over the fact that the Plan had come to a complete standstill. There were no Hogsmeade weekends to sneak away during, no opportunities to work on identifying or finding the remaining Horcruxes. There were no meetings either, which meant he could neither try to work out who the mole was, nor gather information about the planned attack on the Ministry that he might pass on to Dorcas.

The sheer stagnation made him feel so useless and agitated that, in a way, he was almost relieved when he received a letter from Cissy — even though, as it turned out, the whole ordeal would place him before someone he had not at all expected, and therefore in rather a difficult predicament.

He wasn't entirely at a loss with the Horcruxes, though. In the beginning, when he'd first learnt of their existence, he'd struggled to imagine what they might look like. After all, they could be anything — from a piece of rubbish to a vase on someone's windowsill; anything could become a Horcrux once a fragment of soul had been sealed inside it. But after stumbling upon one in the village of Little Hangleton, Regulus had realised one thing: the Dark Lord would never

have hidden his soul in something meaningless. No — the fact that he had chosen a family heirloom, placed in the decaying home of his ancestors, told Regulus that the remaining Horcruxes would all be contained in objects rich with significance and symbolism.

And that seemingly small insight had yielded great results, because he now knew what they were likely tied to. He'd spent months in every library he could access, tracing their meanings and associations. Besides an animal and a set of colours, each Founder of Hogwarts had possessed one item that symbolised them. The locket for Slytherin, the diadem for Ravenclaw and the cup for Hufflepuff. As far as symbolism went, it was the most fitting way imaginable for the Dark Lord to bind fragments of his soul to objects in some twisted honour to the founders of Hogwarts. Regulus was absolutely, unwaveringly certain that the Dark Lord had tracked down those objects and hidden parts of his soul within them. He was, of course, still no closer to finding them — but at least now, he knew exactly what he was looking for.

What he didn't have was rest. He had a very hard time finding quiet long enough to just… think clearly, to reason, to not get completely overwhelmed by the state of things. The more overwhelmed and the more overstimulated he became, the more the war and the Horcruxes and his failure in both got to him, anxiety and dread building on anxiety and dread until he could barely breathe.

So when Cissy summoned him for a meeting on Friday evening, he decided to take the opportunity to get away from Hogwarts for the entire weekend. He had always perceived Hogwarts as a refuge, a safe haven for all the things he liked to run from, but now, more than ever, it felt suffocating. It felt suffocating to be trapped inside those walls, unable to change or do anything about all that needed to be changed and done. It was then he realised that Hogwarts hadn't truly been a refuge for years. He, after all, carried the Mark with him everywhere he went. No matter how strong the concealment charm, the faint, irritating pressure it left behind served as a constant reminder of the indisputable fact that no matter how thick the walls of Hogwarts, how far the distance from Bellatrix's meeting room, or how long before he would forced into a marriage, he could never really out run who he was, or who he had become.

Adding to that was the constant unease within his circle of friends, the faint awkwardness in every exchange with Miller which had once been so easy, and Barty's repeated remarks about whether he even wanted to finish Hogwarts at all.

Regulus didn't know which grated on him more — the feeling that all his painstaking effort for his education, all those gruelling N.E.W.T.s, was being dismissed as pointless by Barty's cynicism, or the fact that he did not, at all, like the idea of who Barty might become once outside these walls.

Either way, the result was the same, and with a few well-placed tearful expressions and pleading eyes towards Professor Slughorn, he managed to secure himself an entire weekend away from Hogwarts.

Once he stepped out of the fireplace at Grimmauld Place, he was immediately welcomed by Cissy, who enveloped him in a tight hug.

"Reg, I've missed you," she said softly.

Regulus shot her a tight smile, feeling something pressing in his chest at the idea of Cissy waiting here for him — and Mother, without a doubt, lying upstairs in bed, withering away. He didn't say anything about it, gave no indication whatsoever, but deep down he knew that Cissy was partially responsible for Mother's sick, frail state. The fact that she had never addressed that, yet dared to meet him here, in Mother's house, left him with a rather sour taste in his mouth.

He ignored it, though, because he knew he needed Cissy on his side more than ever — and because he was rather curious about why she was here in the first place. Normally, he would simply Floo to Bellatrix and meet her there.

The reason was explained quickly.

"We're not going to Bellatrix's for the meeting," Cissy said.

Regulus raised an eyebrow. "We're not?"

She shook her head. "They've now officially taken residence at Northumberland."

This surprised Regulus — and, in another way, didn't. He knew about the estate at Northumberland; he knew that with their numbers growing, it was easier to have a large estate not bound to anyone. Some meetings — the less important ones, which had not required his presence — had already been held there. The fact that they now had a unified, permanent base only confirmed what Regulus had suspected for some time: they were entering a new and far more critical phase of the war.

At the doorstep of Grimmauld Place, Cissy took his arm, and they Apparated.

They arrived in a broad stretch of meadow surrounded by dense woodland. Several buildings were scattered across the clearing — the main house at one edge and a few smaller structures dotted further out. As they crossed the grass, Cissy gave him a quick rundown. The main building apparently contained the meeting room and several adjoining chambers, with a kitchen below and bedrooms above. The smaller buildings each had their own purpose: one for duelling practice, one for brewing potions, one serving as an improvised hospital ward, and another holding the sleeping quarters for those stationed there. It was, in every practical sense, a sort of barracks.

Outside, two unfamiliar men and Yaxley were duelling, taking advantage of the last of the afternoon light. Mr Nott stood nearby, cigar in hand, drinking with Rodolphus. Behind them, a thin stream of steam rose from the potions building.

Regulus let his gaze travel across the estate until it settled on the long, low structure that must have been the sleeping quarters.

“So there are rooms here, then? To stay in?” he asked.

Cissy nodded — then, after a moment, understanding dawned. “You’d like to stay for the weekend?”

Regulus inclined his head. “I already mentioned the possibility to Slughorn.”

Cissy smiled, her expression softening. “Oh, that’s wonderful. I’ve missed you — everyone’s missed you.”

Regulus offered her a stiff smile and then followed as she led him into the largest building for the meeting.

The meeting room was larger than Bellatrix’s, though just as cold. A great U-shaped table dominated the space, capable of seating perhaps thirty people. In its centre stood a smaller round table where decanters and glasses poured themselves. The open end of the U faced the front of the room, where a tall, throne-like chair stood — and in it, the Dark Lord already sat, as though presiding over court, king among his subjects.

Regulus drew a secret breath, forcing his thoughts and emotion to still. Then he met the Dark Lord’s gaze and inclined his head in

respect.

“Regulus,” the Dark Lord said softly, a trace of amusement curling at the edge of his voice. “How good to have you here.”

Regulus’s heart remained mercifully steady. “Thank you, my Lord. It’s a pleasure.”

One by one, the others began to file in. It wasn’t a large meeting, but it wasn’t a small one either. As the seats filled, Regulus couldn’t help but wonder…

Was the mole here?

He *had* to be, surely. To have access to the kind of information that had reached Dumbledore, he must either have been present during the attack itself or high-ranking enough to sit in on the meetings discussing it.

And all the important ones were there.

Could it be one of the men seated beside Mr Nott? Or — impossible as it seemed — Mr Nott himself? Had his future father-in-law undergone the same change of heart Regulus had, and was now betraying the Cause? He dismissed the thought almost immediately. Mr Nott was the living embodiment of everything the Revolution stood for.

His gaze went to Lucius and Bellatrix, of course sitting closest to the Dark Lord. The very idea of either of them betraying the Cause was laughable.

His gaze moved to Yaxley, who caught his eye and sent him an obscene little wink. Regulus, despite himself, gave a quiet snort. It could be him, perhaps… but no. Yaxley was a follower, not a schemer; the idea of him risking everything as a spy just… didn’t add up.

He looked to the men flanking him — Mulciber and Avery. Again, it seemed unlikely. They were young, *fresh* to the Revolution. They wore their Marks as though they were medals. But then again, so had he, once…

He glanced across to where Mr Rosier and Rabastan sat. Just as implausible. Rabastan had been there from the start — he’d lost his best friend for the Cause. Mr Rosier had even argued with his wife about her needing to be proud that their son played such a pivotal role in the Revolution.

All in all, Regulus was completely lost.

He didn't get much time to dwell on it, however, for the Dark Lord soon rose, and the meeting began.

"Thank you all for coming," he said. "I'd say this is a rather fine evening — a fitting evening to discuss the final preparations for taking what is, inevitably, ours."

A silence stretched, everyone hanging onto his very lips.

"The Ministry," he continued, almost indulgently.

A low ripple of laughter and a few whoops followed. Regulus forced a smile although his stomach twisted.

"With the successful abduction of Ashcombe," the Dark Lord went on, "we have been able to finalise our plans in exquisite detail."

Mr Nott shot Regulus a quick wink. Regulus merely dipped his head in return, thinking that successful was perhaps overstating it. They had managed to take Ashcombe, yes, and they had sown chaos and fear, but the fact that so many people had been waiting for them that night… surely that must've raised questions.

"With all the information Bellatrix has so generously extracted from him—"

Bellatrix's laugh rang out across the chamber — wild and unhinged. Instantly, the hairs on Regulus's neck stood up.

He did not want to imagine what Ashcombe had endured. To be locked by Bellatrix in that cellar, at her very mercy, subjected to whatever sadistic whims she wanted to indulge….

Surely there was no worse way to meet your end.

"We have," said the Dark Lord, "obtained information of great significance. Unfortunately, it has set back our timeline somewhat."

Regulus's brows lifted before he could stop them. He felt Rabastan beside him shift, sitting a little straighter.

"It has come to oue knowledge that the wards surrounding the Ministry," the Dark Lord continued, "are reflexive. They heal themselves. Each layer is connected to the Auror Office through an active ward matrix. A direct strike, even the most powerful curse, will

trigger a cascade of counterspells that regenerate the damage in seconds. The stronger the attack, the faster the rebound."

Silence fell. Regulus felt his pulse thud in his throat.

So it was impossible, then — impossible to get through.

"So," Rabastan said, breaking the quiet, "we can't get in, then."

The interruption drew a faint, icy smile from the Dark Lord.

Regulus found it very bold for Rabastan to interrupt the Dark Lord like that. He caught the tremor in Rabastan's hands beneath the table.

"Oh, but we can," the Dark Lord said softly. "With the much-appreciated assistance of Mr Ashcombe—"

Bellatrix's shriek of laughter tore through the air again.

"—we need not despair. Because the answer, my faithful friends, is not *force*." He paused, letting the word linger. "It is *infection*."

No one breathed.

"The Ministry's magic counters overt aggression," he said. "It reacts to the blow — not to the rot. So instead of attempting to break the wards, we corrupt them. We introduce a slow-acting parasitic enchantment, one that binds itself to the existing structure and feeds from it. It hides within the lattice like a fungus, learning the wards' defensive rhythms, adapting with every regeneration, until the counter-charms themselves begin to recognise the parasite as part of their own fabric."

Regulus felt his heart hammer.

Genius. Terrifying — but absolute genius.

"And when that happens," the Dark Lord continued, his tone almost reverent, "the system will cease to heal itself. It will collapse. Slowly, imperceptibly, the defences will weaken — undetectable to any watchful eye."

Rabastan found his voice again. "How do we know it's truly undetectable?"

The Dark Lord laughed. It was somehow worse than Bellatrix's.

“Because,” he said, “our dear Bellatrix has ensured that particular certainty beyond question.”

Bellatrix’s cackle followed, jagged and triumphant, but Regulus barely heard it. His eyes were on Rabastan instead — on the pallor of his face, the tremor in his fingers… The audacity of speaking out twice.

Then Lucius’s voice came in. “As or timing—”

Regulus watched Rabastan from the corner of his eye. The man straightened, every muscle taut, every pore of him attentive.

Lucius went on, “The wards can only be accessed during scheduled maintenance intervals. One of those occurs each spring, when the Department of Magical Infrastructure renews the outer shielding around the Atrium — traditionally around Easter, when visitor traffic is lowest.”

The Dark Lord inclined his head in agreement. “Precisely. That is when the infection will be planted. It will fester quietly for months… until summer, when the wards have turned against their masters — and the Ministry, at last, will be ours.”

The room instantly erupted in cheers, but Rabastan only managed a faint smile.

And there — something settled in Regulus’s chest. A strange, twisting mix of dread and something perilously close to excitement.

Could it be?

Could it really be Rabastan?

He remembered what Rabastan had been like after Hohenhain. How he’d looked while everyone else had been celebrating the prison break of the century — the so-called most successful attack to date. How they’d all laughed and toasted and cheered, calling it a triumph.

But Regulus had seen what the rest hadn’t. He’d seen the one among them who hadn’t celebrated at all. Who’d stood apart, hollow-eyed and quiet. Who had not joined in the praise because he alone seemed to grasp another undeniable fact of what happened that day.

Yes, the attack had freed the one person capable of poisoning the Potters — but it had also cost Rabastan his best friend. And that loss, that price, had gone unspoken, completely unacknowledged. Regulus

had seen it then — the disenchantment, the grief twisted into silence.

But was that enough?

He had nothing solid to go on. He had no proof, no trail, nothing — only a gut feeling and a fragile web of coincidences that might not be connected at all.

Still, it was more than he'd had before.

So when Lucius asked, "Any volunteers?", and Rabastan's hand shot up—

Regulus knew it was inevitable.

His hand rose too.

*****

He was all the more glad of his decision to stay the weekend at the estate when he learnt that Rabastan would be there the entire time as well. They spent the evening playing chess, discussing the news and having a few drinks with Mulciber, Avery, Severus and Yaxley.

Regulus analysed everything Rabastan said, focusing on his every expression as much as he could without arousing suspicion, studying every interaction he had with the others — but by the end of the evening, he had to conclude he'd found nothing.

He and Severus were the only ones not drinking and, because of that, the only ones up early the next morning. Regulus spent most of the morning and early afternoon in the potions lab, where, he had to admit, Severus was doing some rather impressive work.

He didn't particularly like Severus — their bond wasn't strong enough for him to either like or dislike him — but Regulus had always felt a certain pity for him. Everything about Severus reeked of poverty, and Regulus knew how poverty could stand in the way of so much in their world, regardless of ability or talent.

Regulus respected talent, always had — despite its origin, sometimes even *because* of it. He found something incredibly satisfying in Miller's skill on the pitch, knowing she hadn't learnt a thing before Hogwarts and that she was the only Muggleborn in Slytherin. Severus was a halfblood, so perhaps he'd had some foundation before Hogwarts, but for someone from his background to have come so far — to be

running the potion lab for the Dark Lord himself… well, Regulus couldn't help but respect that.

The lab itself was packed with cauldrons, shelves of dried herbs and bottled ingredients — much of it confiscated during raids or smuggled in through illegal means. Severus moved from cauldron to cauldron, explaining what he was brewing. Much of it was for the hospital wing, though some concoctions were darker, intended for use in the war. Before Regulus left, Severus handed him a few vials of potions that may come in handy. Little did Regulus know how soon they would.

After a late lunch, they decided to take a stroll on the grounds with Rabastan, and it was then that the weekend took a turn Regulus had not at all expected.

In the middle of the meadow, he noticed Lucius and Yaxley approaching a small group of three. Severus and Rabastan stood in front of him, still deep in discussion about a draught, so Regulus saw the group over Severus's shoulder — the potion lab to his left, the forest at his back.

He wasn't particularly interested at first; his gaze drifted lazily over the trio — until it caught on the man in the centre. There was something about him that made Regulus instantly uneasy. He couldn't have said why, but his eyes refused to move on. The man's hair was matted, his jaw rough with bristled stubble, his teeth too pointed. Then the man scratched his cheek, the motion revealing long, yellowish nails. There was something… bestial about him.

And then Regulus realised.

It was a werewolf.

Holy shit.

He'd heard the rumours, of course — they'd been circulating for some time. In their conquest for the country's power, the Dark Lord had proposed alliances with creatures like werewolves, vampires, giants and goblins. None of them were particularly appealing prospects, but it was hard to deny that all were, in one way or another, enemies of the Ministry. And your enemy's enemy…

Apparently, the collaboration with the werewolves was already under way, because there was absolutely no mistaking what stood before Lucius now. A female werewolf flanked the apparent leader on one side, and on the other—

Regulus's heart flipped.

No.

No.

Fuck.

This could not be happening. This could *not* be happening.

Panic surged through him so fast it made his vision swim.

Oh, of all people, he had to be here.

Of *course* he was bloody here.

Remus Lupin.

The only werewolf Regulus happened to know. The only werewolf — as far as he was aware — who knew James. The only werewolf, and the only person on this entire estate, for that matter, who knew about *Regulus and James.*

And, Regulus suddenly realised, the only werewolf *Severus* happened to know.

And that was not a pleasant history at all.

Regulus was instantly, absolutely, to-the-bone certain that Remus Lupin was not actually part of the Dark Lord's new alliance. With his love for Sirius, his unshakable friendship with James… Fucking hell, they even *lived* together, for all Regulus knew. No, it was impossible.

This could only mean one thing: as the werewolves were cosying up to the Dark Lord, the Order was trying to infiltrate them. Clever, Regulus had to admit. He knew better than anyone that much of a war wasn't fought on the battlefield at all, but covertly — in backrooms, through betrayal and subterfuge.

Regulus had always assumed Lupin had joined the Order because of James and Sirius, but now it dawned on him that Lupin was actually valuable in his own right. Dumbledore had a spy, an imposter, right in the midst of the werewolves — and they would have no idea of his connection to the very heart of the modernist movement.

But Severus did.

Severus knew what Regulus knew, too: that there was not a single world in which werewolf Remus Lupin — accepted by the most popular boys at Hogwarts despite being a creature most of the wizarding world spat on — would ever betray those friends.

And there was not a single world in which Severus would give him the benefit of the doubt and not raise these concerns.

And if anyone — if *they* — even so much as suspected, if they interrogated Lupin—

Regulus would be absolutely finished.

Fuck. FUCK.

Regulus could feel sweat gathering at his collar, his face turning pale and his pulse pounding so hard it hurt.

Why? *Why*? Why was he here? Why in Merlin's name was he here — risking every single thing Regulus had been working on?

What an idiot. What an absolutely inconsiderate, idiotic *fool*.

Severus was still speaking with Rabastan, entirely unaware of what was unfolding behind them, or who was panicking in front of them.

Regulus needed to get Severus away from here. If Severus saw Lupin — Merlin, no. Severus *hated* Lupin. Hated him even more because of that stupid supposed prank Sirius had pulled. He couldn't let it happen. It *could not* happen.

His eyes darted to the lab. And then, an idea took form.

He shifted his foot — just slightly — enough for Rabastan to stumble. Sure enough, Rabastan tripped forward, catching himself on Severus's arm. Both men turned, startled, and in that split, distracted second, Regulus flicked his wand towards the lab, sending a spark of fire into the doorway.

"Oh, shit— Severus, is that… a fire?"

Severus spun round, eyes widening. A small flame was licking up the wooden frame of the lab's entrance, spreading fast.

Severus cursed and, as Regulus had expected, instantly bolted towards his beloved lab. Regulus watched him douse the flames in seconds before vanishing inside — no doubt to make sure his potions hadn't

been ruined.

Regulus felt a brief wave of relief — but then his gaze caught the group again. He hesitated, uncertain whether to join Lucius and the others. He really didn't want to stand before Remus Lupin right now, but being there might give him a way to steer the situation. Still, perhaps it was better not to—

"Oi! Regulus! Rabastan! Come here!" Yaxley barked across the meadow.

Fuck.

Instantly, Lupin's head snapped up, eyes locking onto him. Regulus met his gaze and felt a jolt shoot straight through his chest at the sight of those familiar brown eyes. How many times had he seen them up close in the Charms classroom? All those hours they'd spent discussing books…. He'd even given Lupin his copy of Animal Farm.

And now, months later, here they were again. Two animals on a farm.

Regulus tried not to dwell on the sheer absurdity of the fact that he was summoned to a meeting for the first time in months, at the edge of Northumberland, had stayed on a whim because of his suspicions about a mole — only to find himself face-to-face with one of James's best friends because *he* happened to be a werewolf, and the werewolves had chosen *this* exact bloody moment to cosy up to the Revolutionaries.

The universe was *truly* toying with him.

As Regulus moved forward with Rabastan beside him, he tried with everything in his power to convey a message with his eyes.

Compose yourself. Don't fuck this up.

"What is it, Corban?" Regulus asked as they reached the group.

Yaxley slung an arm around his shoulders with a grin. "We were just discussing how the Death Eaters seem to get younger and younger these days."

Regulus's gaze flicked to the man at the centre — the werewolf leader. The man looked him over slowly, eyes gleaming like a predator's catching light, roaming from Regulus's face to his shoulders, then down his torso. When he smiled, it was all teeth.

Instantly, goosebumps prickled across Regulus's skin. His stomach twisted violently.

"Oh yes," the werewolf drawled, his voice thick and guttural. "This one's *pretty* young."

Regulus forced his features into indifference, refusing to flinch. His eyes moved briefly to the female werewolf beside the leader — and then to Lupin. Lupin, who was staring at the Dark Mark branded on Regulus's bare forearm, his expression unreadable.

Surely he'd heard about Regulus's presence at the Ashcombe estate — but now he saw the evidence for himself, undeniable proof that Regulus was indeed a Death Eater.

Lupin's lover's younger brother. His best friend's ex-lover.

How messy life had become…

Standing there, Regulus sensed something he couldn't properly place. It was something tense, a faint kind of disgust radiating from Lucius and Yaxley. There was a subtle yet unmistakable distance, and suddenly Regulus understood why Bellatrix had been so glad about her estate being exempt from such meetings.

She'd *never* have allowed halfbreeds through her doors — not even if it meant saving her life.

No, the alliance between the Revolutionaries and the werewolves was purely opportunistic. Regulus was certain that not one single Revolutionary spoke of the creatures with anything but disdain.

He glanced towards the lab. Severus wouldn't be long. He just needed to check on some potions. With a bit of luck he'd get distracted and stay in, but if he came back out now… If he saw Lupin before Regulus could get him away…

For a split second, Regulus realised just how lucky he was that neither Avery nor Mulciber were there. If either of them recognised—

"Hey," Rabastan said suddenly, his head cocked, eyes narrowing at Lupin. "Didn't you go to Hogwarts?"

Lupin looked up, and Regulus had to admire the man's composure. His own heart was hammering like mad, but somehow Lupin's face didn't so much as twitch.

“Yes,” said the leader of the werewolves smoothly, “and therefore, we have among us one with valuable insight into Dumbledore’s world.”

Rabastan’s eyes narrowed further. He didn’t seem the slightest bit unsettled by the revelation that he’d once shared a castle with a werewolf — apparently because something else had caught his attention.

“Wasn’t he friends with your brother at school?” he said, turning towards Regulus.

Oh no. No, no, *no.*

Regulus’s heart slammed against his ribs — but he managed to keep his expression indifferent, almost bored.

“My brother’s a blood traitor,” he said evenly, “but that’s really a step too far. Believe me — our mother has trained us to *smell* them from a distance.”

He realised, a split second too late, that this was rather insulting to the three werewolves in front of him, but they didn’t seem particularly offended. They were probably used to worse.

Yaxley let out a bark of surprised laughter.

The leader, however, still looked very much as though he wanted to eat Regulus. His grin widened, sharp and delighted. “Ah, yes,” he said slowly. “We’ve been trained to smell *you*, too.”

A chill ran straight down Regulus’s spine.

The female werewolf gave a low, throaty laugh. Lupin’s face, by contrast, remained perfectly unreadable.

“Well,” the leader continued, turning his attention back to Lucius, “we’d like to have a look round the premises. See if there’s any… hunting potential, if we’re going to be frequenting the place.”

Lucius’s tone was crisp. “You might want to meet the Dark Lord first.”

The leader shrugged lazily. “Alright.”

Regulus caught Lupin’s eyes again, willing every thought he couldn’t say aloud into his stare.

Get away. Get out of here. You’ve got to leave.

Lupin's expression flickered, and Regulus understood it instantly.

I bloody can't.

Then, after a moment, something else flickered there, and Lupin cleared his throat. "I can do it," he said. "Check the grounds around."

Oh, genius.

For a horrible moment, it looked as though the leader might refuse, and Regulus felt his stomach drop, but then—

"Yeah," the man grunted. "You do that. Rieka and I'll go inside."

Lucius frowned. "We can't have you wandering about unchecked—"

"I can escort him," Regulus cut in, a bit too fast for his liking. He hoped it hadn't sounded desperate, though of course, he actually *was* utterly desperate. Desperate to get Lupin away from there as soon as possible.

Lucius blinked, a touch surprised, but then nodded.

"Very well," he said at last. "You do that. The rest of us will go inside."

The group moved off towards the manor, and the second they were out of sight, Regulus dropped the façade, exhaling sharply. He turned to Lupin.

"To the woods," he hissed through gritted teeth. "Now."

It was clear Lupin didn't appreciate his tone, but he followed without a word.

Regulus had no sympathy for him whatsoever.

What an idiot. What an absolute, brainless *fool* to come here.

The moment they were far enough among the trees, Regulus spun and slammed Lupin hard against a trunk. His forearm pressed across Lupin's throat — hard enough that it even startled himself. It hadn't been a deliberate move, but it would prove rather useful soon enough.

"Are you *fucking mental*?" Regulus hissed, not easing his grip. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

Lupin coughed, his words catching in his throat. He struggled to get a sound out. “Didn’t have a bloody choice, did I?” he rasped. “I’m part of Greyback’s pack now — he made me come.”

Regulus’s glare was ice-cold.

“You’re not fooling me, Lupin. There’s no way you’re betraying your precious friends. Don’t take me for an idiot.”

Lupin said nothing.

“You *are* an idiot, though,” Regulus went on, voice rising. “I had to set the bloody lab on fire so you wouldn’t run into *Severus*!”

Lupin froze. “Snape’s here?”

“Of course Snape’s here, you absolute fool. And he knows what I know too — that you’re a spy. That there’s no way you’d sell out your bloody Marauder friends.”

A silence fell between them.

“And guess what they’d find out in your interrogation, Lupin?” Regulus hissed.

He still had Lupin pinned against the trunk, though his grip had loosened slightly now. Regulus was fairly sure Lupin could have had him on the ground in a second — or at least done some real damage if he’d wanted to. But he didn’t. Either he was too tired, or too careful. He was in enemy territory, after all.

Lupin’s lips curled into a crooked smile. “Ah. You’re afraid of what they’d find about you and James, aren’t you?”

Regulus’s blood ran cold. His mind flickered — not just to James, but to everything else on the line. If he were exposed now… He’d only captured *one* Horcrux, hadn’t even destroyed it. If they found out before he’d found the rest—

“Oh, *fuck you,* Lupin,” he spat. “This is bigger than that.”

Lupin’s eyes dropped to Regulus’s forearm, then settled on the Dark Mark etched into his skin.

“So it’s true, then,” he said quietly. “You’re one of them.”

Regulus couldn’t read the tone. It wasn’t just accusation — there was

something else beneath it. Disappointment, maybe. And disdain. Yes, the disdain was unmistakable.

Regulus ignored the way it stung.

“James told you about our… run-in?”

Lupin’s mouth curved into a smile so sly it would’ve made any Slytherin proud. “Your *slow dance,* you mean?”

“Sod off, Lupin.”

Lupin snorted, though the sound caught as he realised Regulus was still holding him pinned by the throat against the tree.

Regulus let go at once, stepping back. “Sorry.”

Lupin nodded stiffly, rubbing at his neck and coughing to clear his throat.

This was his chance.

Regulus flicked his wand and quietly conjured a glass of water. The presence of Severus Snape within the same bloody hectare as Lupin was, in most respects, a catastrophe — but it did come with one very convenient advantage, and while Lupin bent over, still catching his breath, Regulus discreetly tipped that advantage into the glass.

Lupin took it, still breathing hard. “Thanks.” He drank a mouthful without hesitation — which, considering the circumstances, was staggeringly stupid.

Although, Regulus realised, they weren’t enemies, not really — not even in the supposed sense. On paper, they were both part of the same bloody alliance between the Revolutionaries and the werewolves. In reality, both were spies. Which technically made them allies.

Lupin didn’t know that part, of course. Which only made it more idiotic that he’d just taken a drink from him without a second thought.

Time to strike.

“Are you betraying the Order?” Regulus shot.

“No,” Lupin answered immediately.

There was a pause, then his eyes widened. He glanced down at the glass. “Oh, bloody *hell*. You dosed me with Veritaserum?”

Regulus resisted the urge to roll his eyes. “Of course I did. I need to be sure where your allegiance lies, don’t I? I’m not stupid enough to take someone’s word for it.”

They stared at each other for a moment — then, absurdly, both laughed. Because apparently, the rest of the world *was* stupid enough to take Lupin’s word for it.

Lupin sighed, setting the glass down on a gnarled tree root. “You know what I’m going to say now, don’t you?”

He looked, strangely enough, both amused and a bit bashful at once.

Regulus shifted to lean back against the tree, arms crossed. Yes, he knew very well which card Lupin was about to play.

“Yeah, yeah,” he huffed. “If I rat you out, you rat me out.”

Lupin raised the glass in a mock toast, a glint of wry amusement in his eyes.

Regulus rolled his own, gaze drifting past him, over the darkening trees, the faint hum of voices in the distance. For a few quiet seconds, neither of them spoke. Regulus’s thoughts wandered back to the other two werewolves.

Then, a sudden, utterly unforeseen urge overtook him.

He cleared his throat awkwardly. “I… I don’t think you stink, by the way.”

Lupin blinked, startled.

Regulus immediately regretted it, but his attempt to make things less awkward turned out making it only… more so. “I mean— I don’t think about you like that. I just— you smell… lovely, actually.”

The silence that followed was excruciating.

Regulus risked a glance up. Lupin was staring at him with a maddening smirk which suddenly broke into open laughter.

When the laughter died down, Lupin said, still smiling faintly, “Thanks, I suppose.”

Regulus shrugged, muttering, “And I’m sure my brother thinks so too.”

Lupin let out a soft, amused snort. His voice dropped to something quiet, almost reverent. “He does, yes.”

It took a second for the meaning to register.

“Oh,” Regulus said. “Does that mean… you two—?”

Lupin’s smile turned wry. “More or less.”

Regulus nodded slowly, unsure what to do with that information — unsure how to feel about his brother liking men. Or one man, at least. “Right. Good.” He coughed. “Good for you.”

Silence settled again.

After a moment, Lupin asked, softly, “How did you end up here?”

Regulus blinked, caught off guard by the question.

Lupin’s eyes were steady on him. “We sort of understood it might happen. It’s been Sirius’s biggest fear for years.”

Regulus’s throat went dry at the mention of his brother. He didn’t know whether to tell Lupin to shut up or beg him to go on — to hear *something*, anything, about Sirius, who felt further away now than ever.

“And James…” Lupin hesitated. “He was so sure it wouldn’t come to that. He was—”

“Don’t talk about James,” Regulus snapped.

Lupin’s brows lifted. He studied Regulus for a long moment, then nodded. “Alright. The question remains, though — how did you get here?”

It was one of the questions that haunted Regulus at night.

How *had* he ended up here?

What choices had led to this? What errors, what turns? To be here — in the woods of Northumberland, the Mark seared into his arm, still months from graduating Hogwarts… and only *months* from trying to seize control of the Ministry. Months from marrying Isadora Nott, when the only person who could ever truly have his heart was the best

friend of the man standing before him now.

Regulus froze, straightening, and met Lupin's eyes. "How did *you* end up here?" he countered.

It was messy. It was war. It was complicated.

And so much more.

They spent another fifteen minutes in the woods for the Veritaserum to wear off and then made their way back across the grounds. Severus was fortunately nowhere in sight and judging by the steam pouring from the lab, he was still holed up inside. Regulus decided he'd better make sure he stayed there for as long as the werewolves remained.

Just as he was about to head towards the lab, he turned slightly. "Try not to come back here too often," he muttered. "Snape's almost always around."

Lupin nodded. "Thanks."

An awkward pause lingered.

"Well… won't see you around, I guess," Lupin said.

"No," Regulus replied quietly. "I guess not."

Though in war, there were never guesses — only improbabilities and inevitabilities, and sometimes, they were the same.

Chapter End Notes

> REMUS IS THERE, being sassy as ever, even while he's pinned against a tree (which, honestly, might be Reg's new signature move).
>
> ♥
>
> P.S.: looking forward to the next chapter ;)

Chapter 13: Of Endings & Beginnings

Chapter Notes

Hii there everyone!
As promised, another (almost 10k-worded) chapter for the weekend. Thank you for all your lovely comments, and enjoy!

xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You’re tense.”

Regulus drew his gaze from the ceiling and looked down. James was watching him, chin resting lightly on his chest.

He was right, of course. Regulus was tense, had been tense for a while now. That low hum of dread and anxiety had become a constant presence in his veins, sometimes pulsing sharply, but mostly lingering just beneath the surface, quiet but always there.

He met James’s eyes and tried not to acknowledge the strange tangle of guilt and affection that stirred in his chest at the worry behind James’s gaze.

He reached down, brushing a lock of unruly hair from James’s face. His fingers lingered, thumb tracing the line of James’s jaw, tender and slow.

“I’m fine,” Regulus murmured, a small smile tugging at his lips. “It’s nothing.”

James didn’t reply. Instead, he caught Regulus’s thumb and pressed a light kiss to it, so light it shouldn’t have made Regulus feel so much as it did.

“What would help?” James asked quietly, not bothering to hide that he didn’t believe him in the slightest.

Regulus hummed in question.

“What would help?” James repeated.

Before Regulus could answer, James shifted upwards. His bare skin brushed against Regulus’s as he slid up to lie beside him, then tugged him gently until Regulus was resting against his chest instead of the other way

round. One of James's hands drifted up to card idly through his curls. Regulus exhaled in quiet delight.

Truth be told, there wasn't much James could do. For the dread to disappear, the world would have to change, and no matter how indestructible James Potter seemed, he could not change the world.

But he could take Regulus into his world for a while. It was the only thing that, somehow, always worked — the memories, the anecdotes about him growing up. The stories filled with self-baked biscuits, invented games, half-sanctioned mischief, and endless, unconditional love.

"Tell me a story," Regulus whispered.

James knew exactly what he meant, and Regulus could feel him smile against his hair.

"I've never told you how I got this scar, have I?"

Regulus followed his gaze, to the thin pale line tracing the inside of James's thigh.

Regulus reached out, fingers brushing lightly over the mark. It wasn't high enough on this thigh to be indecent, but neither low enough to leave him unaffected.

He heard James swallow.

Biting back a smile, Regulus let his hand linger, tracing the scar again — this time a little slower. Then he brushed his thumb just slightly higher, purely to amuse himself. The skin was warm beneath his touch.

As expected, James's breath caught, chest rising sharply beneath Regulus's cheek. Regulus felt James's heart thud once, hard.

"If you keep doing that," James said hoarsely, looking at Regulus with so much love and warmth in his eyes that it seemed to overflow, right into Regulus's chest, "I won't be able to talk."

Regulus laughed quietly and pressed a quick kiss to his chest before withdrawing his hand, letting it rest harmlessly on James's stomach. "No, I want to hear it," he murmured.

James's hand found his hair again, fingers gentle. "Alright," he said, smiling. "So — I was about eight, I think." His voice softened. "It was my Mum's birthday — January 11th. Snow everywhere. Mum had just baked

biscuits, and I'd promised not to go near the pond on my own — she'd caught me staring at it all morning. But, of course, I waited until she was busy and snuck out anyway."

Regulus could hear the grin in his voice, and smiled along.

"I crept down to check if the ice was thick enough, and when I leaned over… the branch I was holding onto snapped. I nearly went straight in. Luckily, a stick caught me instead — right here." He tapped the scar. "Hurt like hell, but it probably saved my life. I screamed so loud Mum heard me from the kitchen."

Regulus smiled faintly. "What did she do?"

"Nothing," James said, the fondness so clear in his voice. "I mean — no shouting, no telling me off. She was just relieved, I guess. She and Dad pulled me inside, wrapped me in a blanket, cleaned the cut, and made cocoa. Then Dad promised we'd find a proper frozen pond once it was cold enough."

Regulus's smile deepened. It was exactly how it should have gone. He could actually feel the warmth, the love from a memory as James was sharing it right now, so bright and tender that it managed to draw out that underlying pinch of knowing that it would not, at all, have been how his own parents would have reacted to this.

His eyes wandered to another small scar — this one near James's elbow. "And this one?"

James followed his gaze and laughed. "Ah, that one's a funny story, too…"

And off he went again, his voice quiet and reverent. The longer he spoke, the less Regulus felt he was listening to a story at all, and the more it was like he was stepping inside it — inside the world James came from. A world full of safety and sunlight and love. And Regulus, indeed, felt the tension unspool from his body, replaced by nothing but the unconditional love and tender warmth that he'd never known — at least not until meeting the very person whose arms he lay in now.

*****

As the days grew longer, time seemed to slip by quicker, and before Regulus quite realised it, he was on the train back to London for the Easter holidays.

Boarding at Hogsmeade and finding a compartment had been one of

those particularly uncomfortable moments when he wasn't sure what to do with the fragile state of their group. He had no idea how to handle the strange conflict between what he felt comfortable with and what everyone else might be most comfortable with — nor where, if at all, the two overlapped.

In the end, he simply chose their usual compartment and left the rest to fate.

Isa followed, wordless, and sat down across from him. As always, she seemed to sense his unease, and offered a small, reassuring smile before he turned to look out the window.

Just moments later — unexpectedly, almost awkwardly — both Barty and Evan stepped inside. They gave brief nods of acknowledgement and took their seats, making that they sat there together in silence so very uncharacteristic of any room Barty was in. The true reason behind the small reunion — just the four of them in a compartment — Regulus would only understand in a few days' time. For now, he took it for what it was: a wordless agreement that, despite everything, they were still in this together.

Yes, they had fallen out. And yes, it had become harder lately for Regulus to remember the good days — the days that had made Barty one of his closest friends. The afternoons by the pond at Black Manor, Barty threatening to shove him in or chasing Isa's sisters through the grass. The days when Barty's banter and humour had been one of the brightest things in an otherwise very dark period. Those moments when he and Barty had known that, when it came to certain things, only they truly understood one another.

Among their group, only the two of them understood the weight of abuse. For all that Regulus and Barty differed, and for all they might have found in others — that was something they'd found in each other and each other only.

As the train rattled on, Regulus forced himself to hold onto that. Outside the castle, it was all the more important to cling to what bound them.

Evan was the first to break the silence. "So," he said, turning to Isa, "off to your place in Manchester?"

Isa shrugged, then glanced at Regulus. "I was thinking of going to Black Manor, actually."

Regulus cleared his throat, not quite meeting her gaze. “I’ll be out for part of the evening, though.”

Her eyebrows rose slightly.

Regulus didn’t know whether Barty and Evan had already caught wind of it through some cryptic owl from Evan’s parents, but he decided to mention it anyway.

He turned to them. “You two as well.”

Evan looked up. “Meeting?”

Regulus nodded once.

Barty’s lips curled into a smile. “*Wicked*. Oh, I’ve got a feeling this holiday’s going to be absolutely terrific.”

Isa met Regulus’s eyes across the compartment, the faintest wry smile tugging at her mouth.

“Dunno,” she said quietly. “I feel like Easter holidays are always the holiday from hell.”

And, once again, she’d turn out to be right.

*****

Now that Regulus would be out for most of the evening, Isa decided to visit her mother and sisters before joining him later at Black Manor. Regulus didn’t pry, but it was obvious she wasn’t particularly looking forward to it. That in itself wasn’t unusual — Isa had fallen out with her parents often enough over the years — but this time, Regulus had the distinct feeling it was because her mother was determined to bring up the impending wedding at every opportunity, and Isa was desperate to avoid it.

Regulus understood that well enough. He had the same problem with Cissy, after all.

After dropping off his things and having a quick bite prepared by Whiskerley, he Apparated to the meadow in Northumberland. It was as lively as ever. A few Revolutionaries duelled on the grass, the rest gathered in small groups by the doors of the main building where the meeting would be held.

From what Regulus understood, it was meant to be a routine

gathering. Most of the Revolutionaries had returned from assignments abroad, the timing neatly coinciding with the Hogwarts holiday. The meeting would serve mainly as an update and a recap of their Easter infiltration of the Ministry's wards, with smaller gatherings to follow for those directly involved.

And indeed, it proved to be a dull affair. Regulus sat beside Barty and Evan, the three of them listening attentively while the Dark Lord moved through reports and updates. There wasn't much that was new — a brief note about progress with the werewolves, which made Regulus sit a little straighter; a mention of Mr Nott's contacts with smugglers along the Slavic borders; and a few names of interest within the Ministry.

Compared to all the meetings he'd attended over the past year, this one was… almost boring. Regulus had grown used to gatherings that set entire chains of events into motion, but this time it felt oddly static.

Until, of course, it didn't.

As it turned out, this meeting was no different from the others after all — the catalyst simply came after.

When the meeting concluded, chairs scraped back and people began to file out. Regulus lingered for a moment because Mr Nott had stopped him for a few words of polite small talk. Later, he'd think about the triviality of staying behind to exchange pleasantries with his future father-in-law — and how that small, seemingly insignificant choice had set so much in motion.

He was just about to step out when he heard it.

"…and the Potters, of course."

Instantly, instinct made him pause, his ears pricked. He crouched slightly, pretending to tie the lace of his boot.

What followed was one of Bellatrix's manic laughs. The hair on the back of Regulus's neck rose instantly.

Why would anyone mention the Potters? And why hadn't it been raised during the meeting itself? The Potters were the figureheads of the modernist movement; surely anything involving them would be relevant to the war?

“Oh yes,” she said, her voice lilting, almost gleeful. “The best news of the year.”

What?

The best news *of the year*?

The Potters.

Regulus’s stomach turned cold. He knew well enough that anything Bellatrix deemed good news was the exact opposite for him. And somehow, somewhere deep inside, he knew the kind of news that would make Bellatrix laugh like that — knew there was only one thing that could make her absolutely *beam* with glee while uttering the name of the Potters.

But as long as he didn’t know… it could still be anything.

He needed to know. Needed to know why that name had surfaced here, in this room.

He couldn’t ask, of course — couldn’t afford to draw attention. Normally, he’d have done anything to avoid engaging with Bellatrix at all. Luckily, Mulciber had also lingered behind, asking the very question Regulus so desperately wanted an answer to.

“What’s this about the Potters?”

Bellatrix gave a bright, horrible laugh. “Oh, haven’t you heard?”

Regulus’s throat went dry.

And then came the words. The words he’d understood the moment Bellatrix laughed. The words that froze his blood and sent a cold shock racing down his spine.

“They’re dead.”

Regulus’s heart stopped. The earth itself seemed to still.

Mulciber blinked. “Oh really?”

Mr Nott’s voice joined in. “Yes. They died nearly two weeks ago.”

What?

Looking up from his shoes, Regulus saw Mulciber frown faintly.

“Strange. I haven’t heard anything about that.”

Mr Nott gave a small shrug. “It’s been hushed up — they don’t want morale to drop.”

Bellatrix laughed again — high, sharp, and terrible, making Regulus’s skin crawl. “Oh, I wish I could’ve done it myself,” she sighed. “But Dragon Pox got there before me.”

Beside her, Rodolphus snorted. “The means don’t matter. It’s the result that counts.”

Regulus didn’t hear anything else. The world around him simply… fell away.

He had no recollection of leaving the room — only hoped that he’d done so looking normal, composed enough not to arouse suspicion.

No.

No.

The Potters…

James’s parents.

They were *dead?*

He knew they were older — older than most parents with sons their age — but not *that* old. Not old enough, by wizarding standards, to die of Dragon Pox. Not nearly old enough to leave their son behind.

Oh, James… He would be devastated.

All the stories James had told about them — about Potter Manor, about the summers there, about all the Quidditch matches and Christmas holidays… they all had one thing in common. Everything the Potters touched, everything they said or did or loved, was drenched in affection.

Regulus hadn’t known them well. He’d only interacted with them briefly. But he knew their son — and he knew that any people responsible for raising someone like James Potter, responsible for bringing someone like James into the world… well, that world would be so much emptier for their loss.

And it wasn’t just James’s loss. It was a terrible loss for the world in

general — and, for Regulus, a personal one too. He felt it deep down, irrational as it was. Because some part of him, tucked away in the far corners of fantasy, had always hoped that one day he might meet them properly. That one day, he might know the people who had made James who he was. And though that hope had always been improbable, it had now become impossible.

He crossed the meadow in silence. His hands were trembling violently and his stomach kept twisting and twisting, no matter how much he willed his body to stay composed. In the hurry and haze, he'd left his cloak in the meeting room. It was too risky to go back and risk getting seen so pale and so stressed, so he braced the night air which had turned rather cold.

Barty stood with Evan, Mulciber, Avery and Snape just outside the building, clearly waiting for Regulus.

"Let's get a drink," Mulciber grinned, glancing at the barracks at the other side of the barracks.

Regulus pointedly avoided Evan's gaze, somehow feeling that he might see the turmoil in Regulus's eyes. He swallowed hard and forced his voice to steady.

"Can't," he said as lightly as possible. "Promised Isa I'd head straight back."

The boys whistled and jeered suggestively at that. Regulus managed some sort of grin, though it felt more like a grimace, and quickly turned towards the Apparition point.

He knew he should leave it. He knew he shouldn't act on it. He knew — with every rational fibre of himself — that it would be better for everyone if he simply Apparated back to Black Manor and returned to Isa as promised.

But it was a lost cause.

It had been from the moment he'd heard Bellatrix laugh after the mention of *The Potters*.

And so, against everything he should do, should think, should want, he Apparated to an alley in London — only to turn the corner and find himself across from a building he'd seen only once in real life, yet countless times in his imagination. He shivered against the cold, but didn't even register it enough to reprimand himself again for

forgetting his cloak — he was too focused on scanning the street where a seemingly unremarkable row of flats perched above a stretch of shops. Regulus let his gaze travel over the façades until it came to rest on the chemist.

"So… this is where you lot live now?"

"Yeah — up there. Above the chemist."

A storm of emotions tore through him.

The strongest of them was longing — an almost physical ache that seized his chest as he stared up at the curtained window above the shopfront. Behind that glass lived two of the most important people in his life.

It felt as though they'd been separated by miles, by worlds — but they hadn't. They'd been here all along. So close, so terribly easy to reach.

And with that realisation came fury — raw, incredulous fury. Because they *were* so close, so easy to reach, and that was, quite frankly, the most idiotic, reckless, *mind-numbingly stupid* thing imaginable.

Still, he gave them the benefit of the doubt. The fact he could see the flat didn't necessarily mean he could enter it. Surely they'd taken *some* precautions.

Perhaps, in a way, it was a mercy that anger burned so brightly through him — that he was too consumed by it to think clearly. Otherwise he might not have tried, might have stopped to consider the danger, the implications of simply barging into the flat.

Which was, honestly, precisely what he did; he pushed all thought and reason aside and barged straight in — and the instant he did, the fury in his bones intensified to an astronomical level.

They were truly out of their minds. Out-of-their-bloody-minds *stupid*.

After a small hallway, he found himself standing in the doorway of what had to be the living room. It was small but warm, with mismatched sofas that would have made Mother drop dead on the spot, several stacks of books scattered about, a guitar propped in the corner, and a Muggle television on a cabinet. One wall had been turned into some kind of shrine for Puddlemere United, covered in posters of broomsticks and beaming players.

A sudden thud broke the stillness — the sound of a book hitting the floor. Regulus's eyes snapped towards the source.

And there he was.

Sirius.

Standing across the room in his lounge clothes, hair a mess, expression one of such utter bafflement that in any other circumstance, Regulus might have laughed. He didn't laugh now.

In two strides, he all but flew across the room, seized Sirius by the shoulders and slammed him violently against the wall.

"Why the *fuck* can I walk into this flat without any problem?" Regulus hissed. "No wards? No security? No common fucking *sense* whatsoever?"

How was this possible? How could the so-called brightest Gryffindors of their generation be so unthinkably, indescribably careless?

"Do you even realise there's a war going on?" Regulus went on, voice rising. "What if someone wanted me to get to you? To get to *James*? Hah?"

Sirius's shock twisted quickly into anger.

"Oh, believe me," Sirius snapped, his voice almost venomous, "I wanted nothing more than to block you out. The only reason you can get in is because *Prongs* is too bloody naïve. He insists on believing in the good in people."

His gaze flicked down to Regulus's bare arm. With his sleeves rolled up, the Mark showed — dark and stark against his pale skin. The distaste on Sirius's face was unmistakable. He looked almost ill before his expression hardened into disdain.

"But I suppose," Sirius said coldly, "you know all about that already, don't you?"

Regulus was too busy swallowing down the bile in his throat at the look in Sirius's eyes to notice that Lupin had appeared in the doorway at some point, watching silently as the scene in the living room unfolded.

Sirius, still pinned to the wall, gave a sharp, humourless laugh. "What

a wonderful way to visit your brother's flat, really."

Regulus shot him a glare, then released his grip. With his now free arms, he rolled down his sleeves in a quick motion.

Lupin's voice came from the corner of the room, edged with irony. "I suppose it's become some sort of rite."

Regulus's head turned slowly towards him. It took a heartbeat too long to realise what Lupin was referring to — Northumberland, the tree, the forearm pressed to his throat.

The corner of Lupin's mouth lifted in the faintest smirk.

Regulus tore his gaze away, back to Sirius — who looked thoroughly, and understandably, confused.

Lupin stepped forward, his tone serious now.

"Would anyone want you to get to them? Does anyone know about you and James?" he asked with a frown.

That, in Regulus's opinion, was not the point. The point was that they *could*.

"Well, no," he sputtered, "of course not."

"Oh, brilliant," Sirius drawled, hands on his hips. "Would've been lovely if Voldemort had known before *me* that you've got the hots for Prongs."

It was then that Regulus realised Sirius had absolutely no idea about the depth of his relationship with James. He also realised he had no idea what Sirius actually *did* know — what he'd been told, what he'd guessed, and what James had chosen to keep to himself.

Knowing James, and his incurable sense of right and wrong, he'd have wanted to tell Sirius everything the moment he'd found out. It had always been at Regulus's insistence that they keep things from his brother, and James had — despite his conscience clearly eating him alive — allowed it, because Regulus had kept reminding him that revealing it would put them in fatal danger. And perhaps, too, because James had been unable to pull himself out of that initial impulse to see where it led before they shared it with the world.

And here, Regulus realised that Sirius didn't know much about where

it had led them at all.

He knew his brother well enough to guess he hadn't wanted the details. To Sirius, it had been betrayal enough; knowing the rest would only have twisted the knife. So he'd chosen avoidance — deciding it was better to skirt the pain than drag it out with details.

Sirius, therefore, probably knew only what mattered to him: how long it had lasted, why he hadn't been told, and whether it was over.

And since it *was* over, in his mind, he didn't need to know more.

And it also meant that he had no idea just how much Regulus and James were invested in each other's hearts.

Lupin cleared his throat, stepping closer — likely to prevent one of the infamous Black brothers fist fights before it began.

"Why are you here?" he asked.

Regulus looked at him, head tilted in faint bafflement.

How was that even a question?

"I came to see James," he said.

His gaze drifted about the flat — through the open double doors into a small kitchen, then across to another doorway left ajar, revealing a narrow hall that surely led to the bedrooms.

"No," Sirius said immediately.

Regulus's head snapped back, anger flaring white-hot again.

As if Sirius had a say in the matter.

"No one asked for your opinion," Regulus bit out.

Sirius was definitely about to shoot something in return, but Lupin was already stepping in between them.

"Regulus, seriously — James hasn't been well. He's not… leaving the house much. Barely talks at all, not since…" He hesitated. "You know what his parents were to him."

Sirius gave a short, pointed cough. "Not that you even knew them," he muttered.

Regulus barely managed to swallow down the incredulous huff that threatened to rise. It was such a petty move — to play on that sore spot of Regulus barely having known James's parents, of Sirius having been the honorary son, the extra family member. The soreness of all the missed chances, the knowledge that the bond between James and Sirius was something he would never share. It stung.

But it cut both ways.

Because there was something between Regulus and James that Sirius would never touch either. Their love was different — not greater, not lesser, but simply different. It was intimate, it was romantic, something they only shared with the other. There wasn't a corner of Regulus's heart that James hadn't held in his palm, not a part of his body that James hadn't kissed, caressed, adored.

Regulus knew the most intimate sounds, the rawest emotions that he could draw from James, and how to do it, and how to make it just so and just right. He knew every breath between laughter and want, every tremor of tenderness and love that lived in James's chest.

So it didn't matter that Regulus hadn't known James's parents all that well. It mattered that he knew *James* very well indeed.

And Regulus knew that Sirius knew this too — but there was something in his little brother that always managed to draw that pettiness out of him.

Unfortunately, this too, worked both ways.

Regulus shot Sirius a very petty look of disdain.

"I know his parents, you idiot. I've *met* them."

Sirius rolled his eyes, clearly already exasperated, but before he could get a word in, Regulus pressed on.

"I know his mum's birthday's on the eleventh of January. I know the recipe for her cookies."

Somehow, that last one landed — Sirius's expression faltered, a flicker of hurt that Regulus, despite himself, absolutely relished.

"Oh, yes," he went on, voice low and intentionally needling, "you know I've even been to Potter Manor, right?"

The look that crossed Sirius's face told him very plainly that no, he hadn't known that at all.

Regulus felt triumph pulse hot through his veins, a smirk curling his lips.

"Oh, I've been there. From the shed on their pitch to the piano in their drawing room."

He was far too far gone now to realise how truly petty and uncalled for this was — especially given the circumstances, given what James was mourning.

"I've *slept* there too," he shot.

Sirius's eyes flicked to him. They were unreadable, dark.

Regulus tilted his head slightly. "Would you like me to elaborate on *that*, brother?"

There wasn't a world in which Regulus would share anything so intimate between him and James with anyone — not even now, while his pettiness skyrocketed — but it felt good to threaten Sirius with it anyway.

"Alright, *enough* of this competition between you two," Lupin cut in sharply, stepping forward before the air could properly ignite.

Regulus and Sirius turned to him.

"It's not a competition—" Regulus sputtered.

"And if it were," Sirius cut across him coolly, "I'd win, of course."

"Oh, shut up, you—" Regulus started, drawing back, ready to swing at him.

But Lupin was already between them, both hands outstretched between them. "*Enough*." He turned to Regulus, meeting his eyes firmly.

And it was then — in the slight downturn of Lupin's expression — that Regulus remembered why he was here. Not for Sirius, nor for Lupin.

James.

The thought of him — the always-sunny, irrepressible James — now

grieving and alone, made Regulus's stomach twist painfully.

He drew a breath. "Alright," he said quietly. "I won't be long. I just… I just want to see him. Just for a bit, alright?"

Lupin shot Sirius a warning look, silencing whatever retort was already forming on his brother's tongue, before turning back to Regulus.

"Alright," he said at last. "But don't expect too much."

Regulus didn't answer and instead turned to make for the hallway.

He was lucky, really, that there were stickers on the bedroom doors indicating where everyone slept — because he had no intention whatsoever of going back to ask either Sirius of Lupin. There were four rooms, confirming his expectation that all the so-called Marauders lived here. He briefly wondered if Pettigrew was inside one of them, too afraid to come out.

With a thudding heart and faintly trembling hands, Regulus walked to James's door. He had no idea where that joke came from, but James's nickname was enough for Regulus to understand that the antlers on the door indicated that the room behind this door was his.

He pushed the door open slowly.

The room was just as he might have imagined. There was a red carpet on the floor, there were clothes strewn carelessly over a chair, and it was, by any standard, a mess — but a cosy one, warm and lived-in. His bed stood near the window, the curtains half drawn.

The creak of the door pulled James from whatever fog he'd been in. He lifted his head — and for a moment, they just stared at each other.

James froze completely. The confusion and disbelief was almost palpable — his eyes widened and his mouth all but fell open. Then, slowly, he pushed himself upright, his movements dazed and hesitant. He ran a frantic hand through his hair and blinked a few times. Regulus saw him pinch his arm, then flinch.

No, it wasn't a dream.

But it very much felt like one. And the fact that Regulus couldn't tell whether it was a dream or a nightmare settled heavily in his chest.

Because it should, without question, feel like a nightmare. Regulus was here because the Potter matriarch and patriarch had died. Regulus was there because James's parents, the very heart and soul of his world, were no more. And yet, Regulus couldn't stop the fluttering in his chest as he stood there, face-to-face with the love of his life. As he stood there, alone with James in his room. Standing so close, in so private a space.

Regulus tried not to look at the bed James had just risen from — the bed where he lay every night. The half of it that remained unslept in.

If it was that, even.

It was almost unbelievable, considering the reverence with which James had held him at the Ball, considering the tenderness of the words he'd whispered in his ear, but that had been months ago. And months could change everything. In war, months could count for years.

He shoved away the thought — the violent, twisting image of anyone else in James's arms — and looked properly at the man in front of him.

James looked pale, almost sickly, with dark circles etched beneath his eyes. He was wearing grey joggers and an old t-shirt, his hair even more unruly than usual. He looked exactly as he ought to — tired, grieving and lost.

Oh, and there was that unbearable contradiction — the contradiction of the way Regulus's heart sank at the sight of James's grief, and the way it leapt at how beautiful James still was, also like this.

"You're here," James whispered, voice hoarse and frayed.

Regulus nodded, frozen. "I am here."

James blinked, clearly at a loss for words. "H-how—why?"

Regulus swallowed against the lump in his throat, his own voice barely above a whisper. "How are you, Jame?"

James gave a small, broken laugh, tears springing to his eyes. His voice pitched higher with every word that he struggled to get out. "You came to check on me?"

Regulus managed a wry smile. "Your parents died."

“They did,” James breathed. And then, at last, he broke.

Regulus nudged the door shut with his foot and crossed the room in two strides, pulling James into his arms. They half-stumbled, half-collapsed onto the bed, Regulus kicking off his shoes as he pulled James against his chest, holding him together.

James cried and cried, raw and helpless and tearing right through Regulus. He held him tighter, one hand stroking through his hair, the other curled around his back, rocking him gently.

Regulus cried silently, too, feeling so utterly lost at the sight of James, the *feeling* of James pouring his grief, his heart, his sadness out against him.

Oh, to see *James* — always bright, always laughing — like this. Broken and grieving and broken in his arms…

He didn’t know how long they lay there like that, Regulus futilely trying to fight his own tears as James cried and cried and cried. As all the love for his parents, all the pain of their loss, all the ache of everything else poured out of him in tears that soaked Regulus’s shirt and went straight through to his heart, his soul. It could have been minutes or hours, but at some point, the sobs ebbed and James went still, spent, against Regulus’s chest.

Regulus ran a hand through his hair, then reached for the glass of water on the nightstand, pressing it gently into James’s hand. He took a small sip before Regulus set it back down. His eyes were red, swollen, but also clearer. He looked exhausted, but also softer than he had before.

They turned onto their sides, facing each other, simply looking, silently searching each other’s faces.

Regulus had no idea what to do. He knew what he *wanted* to do. He wanted to hug James, wanted to hold him close again, close enough to become one. He wanted to murmur all soothing words and tender phrases he could find in any language in any world. Yet, the truth was that there weren’t many words or phrases soothing or tender enough for this situation. And Regulus didn’t know if James even wanted to hear them from him. He didn’t know whether he’d overstep, whether he’d be crossing a line if he pulled him in again, if he touched him. Somewhere, deep down, he knew he would be. Knew that at least for himself he would cross a boundary, but he didn’t dwell on it. His sole focus was on James.

“What would help?” Regulus asked quietly.

James looked at him then — really looked at him — and the intensity of it made Regulus’s breath catch.

“Tell me a story,” James whispered.

Regulus instantly recognised it — the memory of another time, of a life but not a love lost.

And so, he obliged.

He didn’t tell stories about his childhood; there was nothing in them that could possibly help, and even the best of them carried a bitter edge or warranted a mention of Sirius. Instead, he borrowed from James’s own — the endless memories and half-told anecdotes that Regulus knew by heart. He retold them, taking James on a beautiful and bittersweet trip down memory lane, giving words to all the feelings and emotions he was experiencing right now, but had no way to voice. Giving words to all the love, the adoration, the warmth that James had known, but feared he’d lost with the two people who had embodied it most.

Because that was it — this feeling, this aching sadness, *grief*, was the price of love. And when love was endless and timeless, so too would be the grief.

They lay there, and it felt like both an eternity and the briefest blink of an eye. Regulus kept talking, trying to coax small smiles from James — and James indulged him, letting them come. But at some point, silence fell again, and they just remained there, looking at each other in all the exhaustion, tenderness and fragility they felt.

They were still both lying on their sides, facing each other, heads propped on their hands. Somehow, without either noticing, their other hands had found each other — fingers intertwined.

Then, without thinking, without even realising, Regulus lifted James’s hand closer, and kissed every knuckle in turn.

It was an automatic motion — something he’d done a thousand times before… But times were different now.

They both froze. Their eyes met. Regulus slowly lowered their joined hands to the mattress, feeling his pulse thunder in his throat.

And that was the edge. That small, instinctive gesture offered a glimpse of what lay beyond it — and Regulus wanted more than a glimpse. He wanted to jump, even if he had no clue what he'd be falling into.

The tension between them became so taut it could snap. As they lay there, they both knew exactly where this was inevitably leading. Regulus could hear his heartbeat hammering in his chest, could see nothing past James's wide, hazel eyes — full of awe and want — or the slow drag of his tongue over his lower lip.

He had no idea who moved first, no idea how the distance between them vanished. He only knew that it did, and that it had. One moment, there was breath; the next, there was none.

Regulus's body was taut, rigid — until he felt James's lips on his, and everything gave way. He melted, completely, *helplessly*, into him.

And he wasn't prepared in the slightest — neither in mind, nor in body. Wasn't at all prepared for the all-consuming experience of getting to kiss James again. And the way James kissed him… Oh so achingly slow at first, careful and deep, his tongue brushing over Regulus's parted lips before slipping between them, his breath catching in response. Regulus tilted his head slightly, relishing the feeling when James caught his upper lip between his own before parting again, breath warm and uneven against his mouth.

There was a slow, beautiful rhythm to it — mouths closing in desperate union, then opening again, inviting those deep, languid strokes of tongue. Regulus responded without a single coherent thought in his mind. There wasn't one voice left inside him to call him back, to warn him, to remind him of what this meant — of the implications of what was unfolding right now. His mind was silent, and his body moved of its own accord — one hand on James's cheek, guiding him deeper into the kiss, the other fisting the fabric of his shirt, pulling him closer, closer, *closer* still, until there was no space left at all.

He was absolutely delighted by the feeling of James's fingers slipping into his hair, tightening, guiding him until, somehow, he found himself straddling James's lap. His heart thundered in his chest as James reached up to cradle his face with trembling fingers, pulling him back in to kiss him again — desperate, deep and so very sensual.

Then, suddenly they stilled.

Regulus's eyes searched for James's. At that connection, James's breath hitched, and a soft, incredulous laugh escaped him — a melody of unexpected thrill, of yearned-for rediscovery. And somehow, that sound broke something open. Suddenly, they were both laughing — breathless, half-hysterical, breaking off to kiss again, then laughing some more, then kissing their laughter away. Laughter and kisses tangled together until they couldn't tell one from the other.

It was *absurd*, it was *wild*, and it wouldn't have made sense to anyone but them — but that was what mattered. They understood. They understood the delight, the release, the sheer giddy relief of finally letting go. They understood the euphoria, the thrill of this, of the feeling of James's tongue tracing the roof of his mouth, his hands gripping Regulus's hips as he straddled him, the soft moan in Regulus's ear as he bent down to kiss the curve of James's throat, just below his Adam's apple. Only they understood how grief had brought Regulus here, how the war that had forced them apart, and how it had ultimately, inevitably led to this moment.

Their kisses turned frantic and feverish again, their bodies moving with a rhythm of pure desperation. Regulus's blood rushed through his veins, sound receded from the edges of the world and heat coiled oh so low in his stomach. He had no control left — not over the low sound that slipped from his throat as James shifted him just so on his lap, not over his hand pressing James back into the mattress, not over the pulse of arousal tightening inexplicably urgent at only the slightest friction of James against him.

It was as if they were at the core of a great explosion — the heart of the blast — where everything was blinding and deafening and alive. And in that burning centre, they saw only each other. Everything else — the noise, the wreckage, the ruin — was somewhere beyond the perimeter, forgotten, unimportant.

Regulus was only vaguely aware that they were loud — that it wouldn't take much for anyone to add one and one together and work out what was happening.

He didn't care.

Here, there was nothing but James under him. James's hands under Regulus's shirt, frantically going over every patch of skin, as if rediscovering something he'd been absolutely *aching* for. Nothing but James biting at his earlobe when Regulus's lips found his throat. Nothing but James whispering against his skin in that low, rough

timbre — all kinds of incoherent ways of saying how much he'd missed him and how he'd been craving for so long, desperate for just a sliver of what he was getting now.

"Oh, Reg," James moaned — and it was so affectionate and obscene at once that instantly Regulus felt it burning in his body from the crown of his head to the very end of his toes.

He had no control over his body, now lost in that same rhythm as their mouths had been, a back-and-forth, push-and-pull, building and breaking, leaving Regulus absolutely breathless as he felt the friction between them. And it built, and it fasted, and it felt so familiar and so undeniably *good*. It was what Regulus had been dreaming of for months, waking up hot and bothered in the mornings. It was what Regulus had chased in the dark on his own, but which could never, in any universe, compare to the actual press of James's lips against his, to the sound of James's moans in his ear, to the sheer, overwhelming *pleasure* of feeling him, hard and real, against him.

But, as with all explosions, there came the crash. And with it, the inevitable witnessing of the wreckage they left behind.

He didn't know how or why — or why *now*, of all moments — but suddenly, with sickening clarity, Regulus saw what was happening. What they were doing.

James was grieving. Mourning the loss of the very pillars of his existence, gone barely a fortnight. The sight of him — so lost, hollow-eyed, exhausted — was enough for Regulus to know that James wasn't himself. That he wasn't in his right mind right now.

It was wrong. For so many reasons.

They were doing something so reckless, so irrational, so *monumental* and Regulus couldn't bear it was happening like this. That it was happening when James was raw and broken and barely standing. Because what was the difference, really, between someone intoxicated by alcohol, and someone intoxicated by grief? He recoiled at the thought — at the realisation that he might be taking advantage of James in his most vulnerable state.

And then… then there was Isa.

He didn't want to, and never would, admit how long it took for that particular realisation to surface. To truly remember that he was, in fact, *engaged* — to Isadora Nott — even as his mouth was still on

James's, even as his body burned against his. Yes, the engagement and impending marriage weren't of his own choosing, and yes, he was, with every breath and fibre of him, in love with the man beneath him — but it didn't absolve him in the slightest.

He had always sworn he would be different, sworn to be different from all the men he'd grown up around. And the realisation that he might not be different at all — that he might, in fact, be just like his father — made his stomach twist so violently he thought he might be sick.

James noticed him stilling immediately. His grip on Regulus's hips tightened — desperate, instinctive — as though he already knew what was slipping away, even before it was said out loud.

Regulus felt bile rising in his throat, a sting behind his eyes. He barely managed to look at him.

And he saw it. The exact moment it clicked in James's expression — the confusion giving way to disbelief, and then to something so raw, so wounded, that Regulus thought he might as well have stabbed him straight through the heart.

"Jame…" His voice was small, breaking, almost inaudible.

Silence.

Regulus still sat in his lap. James's hands still rested on his hips, frozen. Neither moved. Neither breathed.

Finally, Regulus whispered, "We can't do this, James."

Something dangerous flashed in James's eyes. The silence that followed was small, thunderous.

"You're… grieving," Regulus continued, his voice still barely audible. He futilely tried to push down the tremble in it. "I'm… I'm marrying Isa."

And then, in a snap, James withdrew from beneath him.

Regulus tried to steady himself, his hand brushing his sleeve as he moved — and in that cruel twist of fate, the fabric slipped back just enough to expose a glimpse of the Mark.

James saw it instantly. His eyes flicked down, catching the black ink

curling over pale skin — and Regulus flinched.

James froze. All colour drained from his face as hurt, disbelief and revulsion cascaded across his expression. Then, abruptly, he turned away — and began to heave.

Regulus leapt up, reaching for him on instinct. “James—”

But James staggered back, one hand outstretched in warning, the other pressed to his mouth to hold back the sickness.

That motion — that small, wordless gesture of rejection — must have been the worst thing Regulus has ever felt in his life.

James’s eyes flicked to the Mark again, and the sight of it seemed to remind James of all that the grief and missing and longing had clouded — reality now slamming into him with brutal, merciless force. Suddenly, James’s legs gave way. He crumpled to the floor, catching himself on his hands, drawing in a shuddering, broken breath that made Regulus’s chest ache so violently it felt like splitting open.

Regulus didn’t know what to do. He wanted to move forward, wanted to help, wanted to *do* something — but the moment he all but shifted, James shook his head again, his face twisted, stomach visibly churning.

James took a slow, shaking breath, then turned his head. His eyes were hollow, his voice flat. “Out.”

Regulus froze.

“Out,” James repeated. His voice was quiet and absolute. So quiet, but there wasn’t a world, a life, a universe in which Regulus didn’t feel that word stab him square in his soul.

He began to tremble, eyes wide, the sting behind them unbearable. It felt like the most heartbreaking, excruciating thing he had ever experienced — to be shown the door by James. To be *rejected* by him — even though he knew it was him who had rejected James first. Even though he knew it was him who was marrying someone else.

He nodded once. Then, barely breathing, he stepped out and closed the door behind him. He didn’t look back.

The deafening, harrowing silence was split by a sound — a wail, so raw, so guttural, so drenched in pain and grief it tore through the

house, through Regulus's chest, through the very air itself. It was then he realised *that* was it — that sound — the most heartbreaking, painful thing he had ever experienced.

His heart hammered painfully against his ribs as he forced himself down the corridor, to the sitting room. His face had gone cold, his eyes burned, and all the emotions he'd been holding at bay crashed into him at once — grief, guilt, devastation, love. He did everything in his power to keep his face schooled, to not let it get to him right there. He had to leave. He just had to leave — he could lose it after, if he just left….

The silence in the sitting room was deafening. Of course, Sirius and Lupin were there too, and Regulus did not want to know how much they'd heard. Sirius was inherently curious, which in his case did sort of go with blurring boundaries, but surely he hadn't actually… eavesdropped?

Regulus quickly shook off the thought, quite literally too full to deal with anything beyond what had just unfolded. Sirius and Lupin stood in the middle of the living room — still, baffled and visibly worried.

It was in the way Sirius didn't say *I told you so.* It was in the way Sirius's face had gone almost as pale as Regulus's. It was in the way he reached out, just slightly, as Regulus all but bolted for the door. And it was in that small, pleading, *Reggie* — which Regulus hadn't heard in years — that Regulus knew that Sirius's heart might have broken a little, too.

*****

Regulus made his way back to Black Manor on autopilot. He walked from the Apparition point through the gates, moving silently, almost mechanically. It was, once again, one of those out-of-body experiences where his body hadn't yet caught up to his heart. All that remained was the inevitable crash.

As he slowly climbed the stairs and moved to his bedroom, he was convinced that he had gone numb, deadened by the stab in his soul. Convinced he'd never feel another thing in his life again.

But the second he stepped into his bedroom — intending to change and then crawl under the covers and disappear — he turned out to be so wrong.

Because Isa was there.

It took a second for his brain to catch up, to remember that she'd said she'd be there. Another second to look up at her face. Another to feel the guilt, heartbreak, pain, grief, *longing* crash through him all at once.

And then he was sick.

It wasn't graceful. It was violent, heaving, gut-deep — as though everything inside him, all the bile, all the grief, all the guilt, was tearing its way out through his stomach.

Isa rushed forward to help, but Regulus shook his head sharply, holding up a trembling hand to stop her — not unlike the gesture James had used to push him away moments before. Luckily, she respected the boundary, remaining where she was — standing helplessly, drenched in worry.

When it was done, he managed to mutter a quick *Scourgify* over himself and the carpet, and then he stood, trembling and shaking, before her.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

Then, barely above a whisper, so fragile and so full of emotion it almost broke itself, Regulus's voice came.

"I fucked up."

And then he broke. The tears came — unstoppable, unending — spilling over and pouring out of him in great, shuddering waves.

Isa moved without a word, guiding him towards the bed. She sat on its edge, and he sank to the floor before her, his face pressed into her lap. She shushed him softly, but didn't yet ask the damning question. She just kept stroking his hair, murmuring all kinds of quiet and false reassurances about how everything was going to be okay, how it was better to let it all out.

But, of course, eventually the question came.

"What happened, Reg?"

He swallowed thickly, then looked up. He knew she deserved to be looked in the eye when he told her. It was the least decency, the smallest act of courage he could offer her.

But he couldn't.

When his eyes found hers — so familiar, worried and confused… He just couldn't.

But she knew.

Regulus could see it happen in real time — the moment the realisation struck. Isa froze.

He swallowed again, instinctively shifting away from her, perching on the edge of the bed too.

"It's about him," she said quietly.

Regulus didn't answer, but the silence spoke for itself. He didn't dare look at her.

"You — you saw him?"

Bile rose in his throat again.

Out.

Out!

Regulus bent forward, his head in his hands, voice breaking as he whispered, "Yes."

Isa's voice turned harsh, almost icy. "What happened?"

Silence.

"What happened, Reg?"

Regulus's breath hitched. He felt the panic in him surge, constricting him, making his chest so unbearably tight. He barely managed to look up at her.

"I… I kissed him."

Isa didn't move. Her face remained completely, entirely still — unreadable and stoic.

"I — he — his parents died, I went over and we—"

Regulus realised he had no control over himself. He didn't know what

he intended to say or how he'd find the courage to say it — but then it didn't matter anymore, because Isa cut him off, sharp and clean.

"I don't want to know."

Regulus blinked.

"What?"

Her expression remained the same — cold, calm and unreadable.

"I said," she pressed, her voice firm, "I don't want to know."

Isadora Nott — always too curious for her own good. Always prying, always asking, always meddling. But now, she didn't want to know. Didn't want to know what had happened between her fiancé and his former lover.

And if that wasn't proof of how deeply she'd been hurt…

"I am so, so sorry, Ies," Regulus said, his voice breaking, tears burning behind his eyes again. "You deserve better. You deserve the world, and I— I can't even say how sorry I am—"

Isa still didn't move.

"I— I understand if you don't want to go through with it," he stammered. "I fucked up, I— you can tell them what happened — we'll stop the wedding—"

Through all his rambling, that was the moment she chose to finally speak.

Her face stayed unreadable, her eyes cool — though there was something contemplative flickering there now, too.

"You think I'd rat you out?" she said. Her voice was eerily quiet. "You think I'd tell anyone that you had some secret… rendezvous with James Potter? That it's not me you love but him, and that's why you can't marry me?"

Regulus flinched at her words. Oh, how true her words rang…

"Do you really think that little of me, Regulus?"

He lowered his gaze, inwardly cowering.

Isa shook her head, then reached out, coaxing him closer. Instinctively, he obeyed.

“No, Reg,” she said after a long silence. “We both know how this union was arranged. We both know the circumstances.”

Her gaze held his, steady and sure.

“What happened, happened. And now, we move forward.”

Regulus looked up at her. The sincerity — the strength — in her eyes was undeniable. Isadora, once again, the steady rock in the chaos.

For all the things he’d done in his life — things for which any other spouse might have hated him, despised him, been disgusted by him — Isa sat beside him, unshaken.

How many would have recoiled from all the people he had killed? How many would have been disgusted by his love for another man and everything that entailed? How many would have been revolted by all the things that he lacked but should be able to give?

And how many would have turned that knowledge against him, out of spite, out of jealousy or pain?

But not Isa.

Isa was here — again — offering him the olive branch he’d burned to ash time and time again, and which she somehow always found a way to revive.

And with that realisation, that knowledge of her steadiness and resolve, a certain calm washed over him — a calm he hadn’t felt in so long.

He was Regulus Arcturus Black. He was the heir to one of the most noble and ancient bloodlines in the wizarding world. He was the youngest Revolutionary, the youngest close confidant of the Dark Lord.

And he was the only one who knew about the Horcruxes.

The only one who could stop the world from descending into madness. The only one who could make sure it became a world deserving, *worthy* of the person he had just left, and the person sitting beside him now.

And it was about time he rose to it.

Chapter End Notes

Okkkkkk… so… I have very mixed feelings about this chapter. It was one of those chapters I had to rewrite a few times before it finally felt... right. It started out as a fun chapter, until it very much wasn't. That shift, that turning point, is (unfortunately) necessary. Because there're Horcruxes that need to be found, there's war that needs to be fought. And Reg — very understandably so — has been completely sidetracked by all the emotions, trauma, and general feelings he's been going through. So he really needed that moment, that sort of wake-up call, that moment of GET YOUR HEAD IN THE GAME.

As for the writing side of things: the upside of a narrow POV is that I get to play around so much with mystery, uncertainty and limited perspective. The downside is that it's hell trying to make other characters' thoughts and motivations shine through, especially when they don't frequent that much. So, a little disclaimer: James's and Sirius's sides of the story will become clearer with time. Sirius's attitude toward Reg (and especially that conflicting mix of being so worried about him and just wanting to punch his little brother for all the choices he's made while also feeling responsible for a fair share of said choices etc etc) and James's 'OUT' both make sense, but they're tricky to show from Reg's perspective.
aaah well, that's all for now, i guess.

Thank you, as always, for reading and for commenting — it really means a lot. Next chapter should (hopefully!) be up next weekend. xx

PS:
R.I.P. Fleamont and Euphemia Potter — absolute legends, the bosses of the wizarding world. But don't forget… Those that we love never truly leave us ;))

Chapter 14: Of Confessions & Betrayals

Chapter Summary

Hi everyone!

Yes, miracles DO exist, because here I am with a new chapter!

I'm so terribly sorry for going AWOL for a while. Life wasn't being very kind, and no matter how hard I tried, I hit a massive writer's block with this story in particular. I ended up focusing more on my other project (a rosekiller AU, which I've started publishing too!) and promised myself I'd come back to this when the time felt right. And apparently, that time finally arrived.

I'm heading into 2026 fully determined to finish this series and I'm very excited about it.

Thank you all so much for your patience and for sticking with me. I won't make any overly specific promises, but the next chapter will definitely be up within two weeks.

Lots of love, as always,

xx

There were many things Regulus would remain thankful to Isa for, for the rest of his life. She had known him since childhood; their lives had been intertwined in more ways than he could count, and she was the only one who understood both sides of him. The only one who knew about the sides of him that were so incompatible that he could not in any way make them rhyme. All the things she had discovered about him over the years, all the parts of him she had uncovered along the way — somehow none of them had scared her off and had instead stirred the desire to help him, even at the cost of her own bodily integrity.

Yes, Regulus would never forget the steadfastness of Isa on his side, and with it came his giving her the room to process their impending wedding — and what had happened between him and James — in her own way.

Which, as should be to no one's surprise, she dealt with in a very Slytherin way.

Their mission at the Ministry was scheduled for the end of the two-week holidays, so Regulus fully expected the first week to be filled with N.E.W.T. revision, duelling practice, and attempts at forcing progress on the Horcrux front. Isa, despite everything, had not fled Black Manor in disgust; she had left only twice to briefly visit her sisters, and spent the rest of her time around him, reading and revising.

Regulus did not miss the rigidity in her posture and the subtle coldness, though. She was less talkative and just generally more withdrawn. It was fair — she was forced into this marriage too, after all, and Regulus did not want to think about what he'd think or feel if their roles had been reversed and Isa had had some rendez-vous with Davies… So, he let it be and admired the fact that despite everything, she apparently still found him tolerable.

The Monday after the first weekend, Regulus woke much later than usual. The early April sun was already seeping through the curtains, and he felt drowsy in that way that only came from sleeping too long. The suspicion was confirmed when he turned over and found Isa gone — most likely already in the morning room. He glanced at the clock and saw that it was nearly ten already.

A groan escaped him. He rubbed sleep from his eyes, reluctantly swung his legs out of bed, and forced himself downstairs. Still a bit drowsy, he walked over the soft grey carpet, onto the cold marble of the entrance hall, then onto the polished wood leading to the morning room.

They somehow always started their days there; Whiskerley would whip out breakfast and they'd enjoy a cup of tea or coffee in silence. So, Regulus expected nothing different today.

Except today turned out to be very different indeed.

Because when he opened the door — barefoot, wearing nothing but a T-shirt, hair an absolute catastrophe, sleep still clinging to his eyes — he found himself face-to-face with Isa and Cissy on one side… and *Mother* and *Isa's mother* on the other.

His heart stopped. He felt heat flood his cheeks.

His eyes snapped wide as the room fell silent.

"M—Mother," Regulus squeaked in a very humiliating high pitch. He whipped his head towards his cousin. "Cissy." Then toward Isa's

mother. “Mrs — V—Vivienne.”

His mother stared at him, unimpressed — utterly unimpressed. Which, in fairness, was technically an improvement from the last broken, fragile state he had seen her in — but it was an improvement he could not appreciate at all while standing there, mortified, practically crumbling under her scrutiny.

“Regulus,” his mother said, her voice cold.

“What— what are you all doing here?” he managed, instinctively taking a half-step back, as if distance could somehow grant him privacy while he stood in front of his future mother-in-law wearing nothing but a T-shirt and boxers.

“We’re here to discuss the wedding, of course,” Mother said sharply.

“Didn’t Isa tell you?” Cissy asked.

Regulus’s eyes flicked to Isa. He knew her well enough to recognise that the confusion on her face was pure fabrication.

He shot her a flat, unimpressed look, then turned back to his mother.

“Right. My apologies — I must have mixed up the days. Allow me fifteen minutes and I’ll be back.”

*****

Indeed, fifteen minutes later, Regulus returned to the morning room with his curls impeccably combed, freshly showered, and draped in a perfectly respectable set of robes. In the meantime, Whiskerley had arranged the whole spread of tea, biscuits and scones. Already when nearing the room, he could overhear the discussion between Cissy, Mother and Mrs Nott about dress fabrics.

Regulus slid into the seat beside Isa, who was stirring her tea with an unreadable expression.

He leaned in, whispering, “Thanks for the warning.”

A small smirk tugged at her lips. “Sorry. Must’ve slipped my mind.”

She wasn’t fooling anyone, of course. Against himself, Regulus snorted — and was relieved to see it coax a faint smile from her.

The reprieve, however, was brief, because then Mother spoke. “It’s

time to set the preparations in motion."

Regulus's throat went instantly dry. It felt like one great, merciless mockery — to be subjected to this, mere days after everything with James. He only hoped his stiffness was being read as ordinary nerves, rather than the sheer impossibility of finding his footing in this situation with Isa.

To her credit, Isa was perfectly composed, offering polite smiles at all the right moments, engaging in pleasantries with the women around the table.

"We were thinking of the beginning of September," Mrs Nott said lightly.

Regulus choked on his coffee. Five months. Five months and he would be Isa's spouse.

Isa snorted at his reaction, though she looked a touch pale herself.

Cissy, amused, added, "You'll have finished Hogwarts, so we won't have to worry about the school term. And everyone will be back from summer recess."

"We would have preferred to hold it before summer—" Mrs Nott began. Regulus fought the urge to choke again, "—but it would be too close to your other activities."

It took Regulus no more than a nanosecond to realise she was hinting at *the* attack — the take-over of the Ministry.

"And later would clash with many people's holidays," Mother added. "So we've set the date for September 11th."

Regulus nodded, though it was a hollow gesture. It wasn't like they had a say in any of it, after all.

The teapot poured more tea of its own accord; the scone platter rotated between them. Regulus didn't take one, despite the hollow ache in his stomach. His appetite had been gone for days, and today felt remarkably worse.

From the corner of his eye, he noticed Isa hadn't touched any food either.

"Now," Mother continued, "we must settle on a location. National or

international — almost anything is possible. International is trickier with current security measures, of course, but this is the wedding the entire country has been waiting for. We have strings to pull. First we choose the scenery, then the site."

"A beach wedding would be beautiful," Mrs Nott offered.

Regulus's heart plummeted.

Fortunately, Cissy seemed to have anticipated this. "Oh, no. Beach weddings are notoriously inconvenient. And we would be forced abroad — the British weather simply cannot be trusted."

Regulus could not have articulated his gratitude even if he'd tried.

"Well," Mrs Nott said thoughtfully, "what about the woods? Or perhaps by a lake?"

And off they went. They dove into discussions about potential locations in the country with lakes, about where to hold the reception and who to invite, about tailors, dresses and rehearsals. About speeches and veils and cuisine and dances. Mother and Mrs Nott steered the conversation, with Cissy interjecting from time to time, and not once were Regulus or Isa asked for their opinion. Regulus let the chatter pass in a blur and distant hum. In the midst of a particularly animated debate about satin versus lace, he glanced at his fiancée.

A feeling of compassion burned through him. Yes, the wedding involved both of them, they were literally the ones the entire event revolved around, but it was no secret that it was always the bride who was placed beneath a magnifying glass, who was scrutinised and picked apart. Regulus was absolutely sure that, when standing at the aisle with Isa, not a single eye would be on him.

No — every gaze would be fixed on Isa. The most beautiful bride wizarding Britain would have seen in years.

Silently, beneath the table, Regulus reached for her. He found the soft warmth of her palm and enclosed it between his hands, giving it a steady, tender squeeze.

*****

Regulus didn't see many people in the days leading up to the infestation. Cissy popped by for tea at some point, and Regulus didn't

quite manage to hide his reluctance to talk about the wedding. He was grateful that Cissy seemed to file it away under stress from looming N.E.W.T.s and the upcoming mission at the Ministry, and even more grateful that, for once, she didn't push, but left him to it. Isa was still around much of the time, if only because her mother was arguably worse when it came to the wedding — and absolutely worse when it came to reading the room, or Isa's obvious reluctance.

He did attend the meeting covering the final preparations for the Ministry operation, but he arrived the minute it started and left the minute it ended, leaving the others having drinks at the Northumberland estate while he went home, claiming he was swamped with exam preparation. In a sense, this was true — he did have essays to write and theory to cover before returning to Hogwarts, but most of his desire to leave the meeting stemmed from wanting to be alone with his thoughts and emotions for as long as possible.

He'd known, when he finally made that decision to contact Valaine, that feeding information to the Order would be difficult. He'd known, too, when he finally chose to hunt Horcruxes, that it would be nearly impossible. Somehow, though, he hadn't prepared himself for the emotional strain — the strain of having to pretend all the time. Of blending in and playing along, while not belonging anywhere. He didn't belong among the Revolutionaries — not anymore. But he didn't belong with the Order either, and he knew he never would. Which left him torn, anxious, and miserable, feeling more out of place than he had for all his life.

Most of the Revolutionaries' conversations had been reduced to discussing the ward infiltration, which they had gone over a million times by now. He'd been asked repeatedly why he was pushing himself so hard, taking on a mission while being so obviously overwhelmed with everything else, but he sold the lie that he needed something thrilling over the break well enough, and he knew the others were glad to have him. After all, he had a solid track record when it came to missions.

Another major topic of discussion was the death of the Potters, which had become public knowledge, and Regulus couldn't stomach the almost gleeful tone with which it was discussed while he stubbornly fought the memory of James — grieving and broken in his arms. Every time the image surfaced unbidden in his mind, he felt he might vomit.

And then, whenever people felt they'd discussed business related to

the Revolution enough, they'd inevitably resort to the *other* topic Regulus was desperate to avoid — the wedding.

So it wasn't surprising that Regulus did everything in his power to avoid the Revolutionaries altogether, spending most of his time at home under the pretence of studying.

And it wasn't surprising, either, that his best friends didn't particularly care and showed up anyway, bringing with them every topic Regulus was trying to outrun. In some ways, Isa's presence was both a blessing and a curse. A blessing, because she almost professionally managed to steer the conversation away from the topic of the death of the Potters when it rose. A curse because her presence seemed to spark in Barty an irresistible urge to talk about the impending wedding.

It was one of those moments where Regulus was reminded just how different he was from one of his oldest friends. Where Regulus tried — desperately — to ignore or smother the elephant in the room, Barty seemed to feel an almost compulsive need to point directly at it.

"So, Nott," Barty drawled, "been shipped off to Paris yet on a quest for the finest silk for your dress?"

They were in the drawing room, Evan and Barty sprawled lazily on the sofa across from Regulus, while Isa prowled the room, rifling through stacks of books in search of something.

"Merlin, how uncultured are you, Crouch," Isa said over her shoulder. "Don't you know the best silk comes from India?"

Evan snorted.

Barty followed Isa's movement with his eyes, then shot Regulus a questioning look. "What are you looking for, Nott?"

"I know I put a packet of cigarettes here somewhere," Isa muttered.

"Aren't you a witch, Isa?" Regulus asked dryly.

She froze for half a second, then sighed, pulled her wand from her robes, and cast a non-verbal Accio, making a packet of cigarettes fly neatly into her hand.

She made a small sound of triumph and Regulus groaned in defeat as she lit one, then tossed the packet to Barty.

Evan, who generally read the room far better than Barty and had a visible clearer grasp on how arranged marriages actually worked in their world, cleared his throat. “So… the wedding’s in September?”

Isa glanced at him. “How do you—” Then she paused, probably realising that Cissy’s mother was indeed Evan’s aunt. “Your mother.”

Barty’s eyes flicked between them as he took a drag from his cigarette. “You’re throwing a proper party, though, right?”

His gaze landed on Regulus last.

Regulus cleared his throat. “Yeah. I mean. Whatever security measures allow, I suppose.”

He tried to fight the discomfort of discussing the wedding with his best friends, who knew so much more than all the others knew — yet not nearly enough to grasp the full weight of it. And from the way Isa sat beside him, silent and suddenly very invested in the filthy cigarette smouldering between her fingers, he knew she felt the suffocating discomfort too.

“And after?” Barty added casually.

Regulus’s eyebrow arched. “ …After?”

Barty snorted. “Where’s the honeymoon taking place? The Bahamas? Some other island?”

Regulus suppressed the urge to groan. Of course Barty would find humour in this — in discussing the honeymoon in front of them. And with it, what he was really fishing for: the wedding night. He felt heat creep up the back of his neck and very pointedly did not look at Isa.

Evan, clearly sensing the tension, gave Barty a sharp shove. “Don’t get ahead of yourself, B. There’s plenty of things between now and the wedding.”

Barty seemed easily distracted and let out a long, aggrieved groan. “It’s fucking unfair, though, isn’t it? Just because we were at Hogwarts during that meeting, we didn’t even get to sign up for this—”

Regulus rolled his eyes.

“Don’t be sour, Barty,” Evan interrupted lightly. “We’ll have chances enough to contribute in the coming weeks.”

A strange silence fell.

“Oh, Rosier,” Barty blurted, “*that’s* how we’re telling them?”

Regulus looked at Isa, who looked faintly shocked — then back at Barty and Evan, feeling, quite suddenly, like a complete idiot for obviously missing something.

Isa got there quicker.

“*No*,” she breathed sharply.

And then it clicked.

All the talk about the pointlessness of Hogwarts, Barty’s relentless comments about wanting to *do more* for the Revolution, the way they’d joined him and Isa in the train compartment. It had felt like a significant moment, but where he’d thought it was just some peace offering after the stalemate following the events with Miller, he had missed that it had been something else entirely.

Their last ride on the Hogwarts Express together.

“You’re not returning to Hogwarts,” Regulus said quietly.

Barty and Evan exchanged a glance. Then Barty sighed. “No. We’re not.”

“But— why?” Isa asked, her voice rising despite herself. “We’re so close. Two months. Two months and you’re graduated. After all these years—”

“We think we can do things that are more… worthwhile,” Evan said carefully.

Isa scoffed. “Oh, come on. You can do your worthwhile things in two months. Two months, a few exams, and then you can be worthwhile every bloody day!”

Regulus, admittedly, was still too stunned to speak. Oh, his subconscious had warned him often enough — all the comments, Barty’s restlessness, his hunger to be *out there*, fighting…

Barty cleared his throat. “Look, Isa,” he said, and the way he addressed her by her first name, and in that tone — shut her up at once. “I’m not trying to undermine the importance of Hogwarts, or all the work you’ve put into the exams.”

He shot Evan a tentative glance, then turned back to Regulus.

“You’ve always said we all contribute to the Revolution in our own way, right? Some people fight. Some people brew potions. Some people plan. Hogwarts was our place because we ‘had so much left to learn’ — and well, Hogwarts was our battlefield.”

There was a confidence to his voice now, a maturity that took Regulus completely by surprise.

“But that’s you, mate,” Barty continued, nodding toward Regulus. Then Isa. “And you. You’re clever. Your minds are your contribution.” He huffed a short laugh. “I don’t understand half the political analyses you try to explain, Black. Or most of the potions you brew. I’m not half as intelligent as you lot—”

Isa opened her mouth, but Barty lifted a hand, stopping her.

“—and that’s fine. Because I’ve got to focus on what I’m good at, yeah? And that’s fighting. Duelling, being *there*. Making a difference.”

Regulus turned to Isa for help — but she looked just as flabbergasted as he felt. There was something glassy, something teary in her eyes now.

“But what about after, Barty?” she asked quietly. “When it’s over. You’ll at least have your N.E.W.T.s to fall back on.”

Barty shrugged, plucking another cigarette from the packet on the table and lighting it with his wand. “We’ll see about that later, Nott. Once we’ve established a new world, I don’t think some N.E.W.T.s are going to matter much for a decent soldier, do you?”

Regulus still couldn’t find his voice.

Oh yes, he had, somewhere deep down, seen this coming — or at least, he *should* have seen it coming, with all the signs and warning. But it wasn’t just the timing — so close to graduation — that left him speechless, but even more the fact that the decision seemed so… thought through. It was surprisingly nuanced, reasoned, and therefore very difficult to argue against.

Because yes, Barty *was* a skilled dueller, and at any rate, *was* better at the practical than the theoretical. He was never meant to be buried in books, but sent out with orders and purpose. And yes, if the war was won by the Revolutionaries and that new world order truly came to

pass, there would be nothing stopping Barty — one of the younger and earlier Revolutionaries — from becoming or doing whatever he wished to. There would be no closed doors for him.

And Regulus knew that Evan — Evan, who hadn't said anything yet, who hadn't spoken a word on the matter so far — would follow Barty. Someone needed to keep an eye on Barty, and Evan was the only one who ever truly could.

So, probably to everyone's surprise, Regulus didn't object. He just nodded, asked a few practical questions, but didn't argue, didn't try to convince them to stay. No, Barty had made up his mind, and nothing was going to change it.

But it didn't stop that feeling — that deep, persistent, nagging feeling settling heavily in Regulus's chest, warning him that this was a very bad idea.

*****

By the time the day of the ward infection arrived, Regulus could have recited their plan step by step in his sleep. For once, he didn't really feel… nervous. They had a solid plan, and it was, all things considered, fairly simple — at least for them. The hardship of it lay in the preparation, not the execution. There had been a great deal of research and careful thought put into identifying Ministry workers who weren't off for the Easter holidays and who could be easily taken just before the scheduled infiltration. From there, it would merely be a matter of blending in and not drawing suspicion while repeatedly casting the infecting charm. Mr Nott had explained that it was difficult magic, and that there hadn't been a lot of research done about it yet, but he assumed they would need to cast the spell every few yards at least, leaving the rest to the self-propagating nature of the enchantment.

So all that was left for Regulus to do was drink the foul Polyjuice Potion, walk the Atrium as unobtrusively as possible, and leave once the job was done. The Revolutionaries assigned to the mission had been paired up, and Regulus deeply regretted not being teamed with Rabastan. He was the reason Regulus had volunteered for the infiltration in the first place, and now it all felt rather pointless, being so far away from the one he was trying to spy on. Reluctantly, he conceded that at least it would be an easy, clean mission.

Or so he thought.

They went to Northumberland on Easter morning, where the people they were meant to impersonate had already been captured. Regulus felt a rush of instant relief when he learned that Lucius was handling them, and not Bellatrix. True, Bellatrix technically couldn't do anything *too* exciting with them — they had to be returned and Obliviated by nightfall — but when it came to her insatiable appetite for cruelty, she tended to be very creative.

Regulus lingered near Rabastan as much as possible, even though he knew it was pointless. The chance of Rabastan slipping and revealing anything incriminating was slim at best, especially given that they were at the estate for less than half an hour.

"Well," Avery said, clearing his throat. "Bottoms up, I suppose."

Regulus nodded and took the foul drink. He was instantly reminded of the last time he'd taken the disgusting juice, and how he had been infiltrating another high-stakes operation back then, too. It felt strange, realising how terrified he'd been back then, how he'd truly believed he wasn't going to survive it — and how calm he felt now. The thought came swiftly and uncomfortably – that one could, apparently, grow fearless. Hohenhain served to release the one person arguably capable of poisoning the Potters, this infiltration served to take over the entire country. And now, with the Horcruxes and thereby the future of the world resting in his hands, Regulus had so much more to lose. And yet, he wasn't all that afraid.

Regulus had never truly been at the Ministry. Or well, he had been once or twice as a child, tagging along with his father or Uncle Alphard — but they were raised with a healthy distrust of the institution, and there had never been much reason to visit. It made sense, then, that he'd been paired with Avery, who knew his way around the Ministry through his work.

Besides, Regulus actually liked Avery. They weren't really close, of course, but with all the years at Hogwarts, all the time spent together at Black Manor, and all the ways they were connected, he felt more than just a fellow Revolutionary. Regulus also knew that Avery appreciated being treated as an equal, despite Regulus's higher ranking — something many others failed to do.

When Regulus stepped out of the fireplace into the Atrium, he had to fight the urge to gape like he had when visiting as a child. Even now, the place inspired awe; the soaring ceilings, the gleaming marble floors, the sheer size of the place. It was, without a doubt,

magnificent.

And they, the *Revolutionaries*, would have it.

That was what this mission was for — to claim the Ministry. To remove Minchum, dismantle the established order, and finally live up to the name they bore: Revolutionaries, enacting a Revolution. Starting a new tomorrow, building a new world order.

In just a few months, they would be here again — not as infiltrators, but as rulers.

Once, that thought would have thrilled him. Would have sent electricity through his veins, made his blood hum with joy. Once, he would have felt honoured to be part of it, proud to hold the quill that wrote history.

Now, it only sent bile rising in his throat and lead settling in his chest.

And there, Regulus felt more than ever that one had to be disillusioned to see things clearly. That one had to taste the lie to recognise it.

And boy, did it taste bitter.

He pushed the thought aside and followed Avery into the main hall. The infiltration took place on Easter because that was when the outer shield around the Atrium was renewed — which, in turn, was scheduled for a day of low traffic. Unfortunately, that came with two challenges: one in preparation, one in execution. Fewer people meant fewer suitable candidates to impersonate. Fewer people also meant less bustle to disappear into — less cover. There would be no hiding in a crowd today. They would have to play their part well.

Said part mostly consisted of walking the Atrium together, pretending to be deep in conversation while secretly casting the spell over and over again. It felt strange, admittedly, to act like this with Avery, but they quickly found an almost entertaining rhythm to it.

“I’d forgotten how magnificent this place is,” Regulus murmured, eyes discreetly scanning the Atrium.

Avery didn’t reply. Instead, he muttered the spell, which, to anyone watching, would look like him responding.

Later, they would switch roles, with Avery commenting on what

Regulus had mentioned, while Regulus pretended to answer and instead whispering the incantation. And so they went, strolling through the Atrium like two Ministry workers catching up on their break. They kept to one side, while Rabastan and Mr Nott took the other, since it would have looked suspicious if all four of them had been circling the same space.

Regulus didn't glance their way, too afraid it might draw attention and just stayed in character, grateful that, for once, the mission wasn't asking too much of him.

Which, in hindsight, was painfully naïve, for Regulus should have known better by now — not a single mission so far had ever gone according to plan.

A good thirty minutes passed before everything shifted.

He never knew what triggered it, or where it came from. He was halfway through muttering the spell for what felt like the millionth time when the alarm erupted, shrill and violent, tearing through the Atrium.

His heart slammed into his ribs as the colour drained from his face. He looked at Avery, who had gone just as pale.

"What?" Avery whispered.

"What's happening?" Regulus breathed.

He dared a glance across the Atrium. The man Mr Nott was impersonating flicked his eyes toward him briefly, the confusion plain on his face. There was also a clear warning in his eyes to stay composed, to keep up the pretence.

"It might be something else," Regulus murmured to Avery. "If they knew we were impostors, we'd already be on the floor, hexed by half a dozen Aurors."

Regulus realised that the words sounded far more confident than he felt.

The anxiety grew once he saw the fireplaces sealed themselves off, one after another. At the same time, elevators opened, flooding the Atrium with people. There was an instant, thick tension in the hall — a restless unease rippling through the crowd.

“What’s going on?” someone shouted. “Why the alarm?”

Then a trio of Aurors appeared at the centre of the Atrium.

“Routine inspection,” one of them announced. “Nothing to be alarmed about.”

Regulus met Avery’s eyes. He knew for sure that there was nothing routine about this. Many Revolutionaries — including Avery — worked at the Ministry, and none of them had mentioned anything like this. Regulus’s suspicion was very much underscored by Avery’s stunned expression.

“They must’ve sensed something was off,” he whispered.

“How?” Regulus breathed. “Shit.”

“Everyone form a line!” one of the Aurors called. “Wands out for inspection.”

The shock was briefly interrupted by a sharp sense of relief — at least he had the wand of the man he was impersonating. The thought of being searched with his own wand still on him made his stomach turn.

The relief was short-lived, though, as Avery reminded him of a rather important detail.

“Fuck,” he hissed. “The Polyjuice.”

On cue, the flask in Regulus’s pocket felt like it was burning straight through the fabric.

Fuck.

Surely they’d want to check pockets… And if they examined the flasks, they’d recognise the Polyjuice immediately.

“We have to ditch them,” Avery whispered.

Regulus shortly considered taking a gulp, but then his eyes trailed over the dozens of Aurors spread over the Atrium, and — more importantly — their scrutinising eyes monitoring all the Ministry workers. Desperately emptying the flask in his mouth just before the line would definitely raise suspicion — but a discreet vanishing spell could at least get them rid of the incriminating evidence. But it came with a price.

How long ago had he taken his last gulp? Twenty minutes ago? That'd leave him with forty minutes, give or take — forty minutes for this routine check-up to be completed lest they not change back into themselves in the middle of the Atrium.

Fuck.

His eyes skimmed the two original queues — dozens of people still stood ahead of them. Mr Nott and Rabastan were better off, since they were closer to the front. Surely they had ditched their flasks too, and would be able to leave the Atrium before the transformation set in. Even if they couldn't exit the Ministry yet, they could at least retreat to a loo, an office, anywhere Aurors wouldn't witness Polyjuice wearing off in real time.

But him and Avery…

The line was bloody *crawling*. Regulus felt the tension coil tighter in his chest, sweat collecting at the nape of his neck with every passing minute.

If they found out he was here, impersonating someone else…

He would be properly fucked.

Him and Dorcas had agreed not to interfere with the infestation. It was too precise a plan, and any intervention from the modernists risked exposing a mole, a spy. With only four Revolutionaries involved, the potential damage far outweighed the benefits. No — their clash with the modernists would come during the Attack in summer.

For a fleeting second, Regulus wondered whether Dorcas had changed the plan behind his back, but dismissed it almost immediately. There was no logic in that. None.

Unless…

Could Rabastan have betrayed them? Could he be the mole after all? But then why give half the truth? Why not just expose the perpetrators? Then again, he hadn't told the Order everything at the Ashcambe Ball either…

His thoughts spiralled fast. He forced himself to breathe slowly, evenly. Panic would make him stand out. Panic would ruin everything. They just needed to be checked sooner — that was all.

They had the wands, there was nothing outwardly wrong, so they would pass. They just had to reach the front before the Polyjuice betrayed them.

His mind scrambled for excuses — urgent meetings, delayed appointments — when salvation came unprompted.

“Third and fourth lines open here!” an Auror shouted. “Follow the queue!”

Regulus and Avery exchanged a sharp look and moved instantly, peeling off toward the new line. At least it would be faster.

Regulus prayed to every deity he could think of, and for once, he was answered, for it barely took more than fifteen minutes before they stood before a bored-looking female Auror.

She twirled her wand lazily between her fingers, sighed deeply and full of exasperation. In any other circumstance, Regulus would have been annoyed by the indifference, but now, he welcomed it. A bored Auror was infinitely preferable to a curious one, after all.

“Name?” she droned.

“Silas Stoneforge,” Regulus said, keeping his voice level.

She held out her hand. “Wand.”

He placed it in her palm. She flicked her own wand over it, murmuring a short incantation. Since the Dementor attack, all government employees’ wands were logged. After a few seconds, a green light flared at the tip of her wand.

She handed his back. “Next.”

And that was it.

Just like that.

Regulus resisted the urge to laugh, or scream. The whole system leaned so blindly on magic. A few simple questions, a minute of actual conversation, and he would have been exposed instantly. It was a brutal reminder of wizarding arrogance. The Muggle way would have been far more effective.

Alas, Regulus was not complaining, and a minute or two later, Avery joined him, eyes bright with relief.

“I think we’ve done enough of the spell, right?” Avery whispered.

Regulus nodded. “Yeah. Let’s get out of here.”

They made their way toward the fireplaces, which were just being reopened, now flanked and closely monitored by Aurors. Regulus forced himself to walk normally, to look unhurried and casual, though he felt anything but. His awareness sharpened the moment he noticed one Auror in particular watching him.

She was tall, with sharp cheekbones and dark hair pulled into a severe bun. Her gaze was suspiciously attentive.

Regulus lifted his eyes and gave her a brief, polite nod.

“Afternoon, Stoneforge,” she said. “You’re going through the fireplace?”

He didn’t miss the faint edge in her voice. Suspicion. Apparently, something about him leaving that way was not what she had expected.

Anxiety surged instantly, his heart hammering so hard he was sure she must be able to hear it.

“Don’t you usually go via the phone boxes?” she added.

For a split second, all Regulus wanted was to flee, to step into the flames and be gone. But his mind, despite the panic, kept working, and still managed to come up with the only explanation that’d be potentially credible in the current situation.

He cleared his throat lightly. “They’re open already? I was under the impression only the floos were accessible.”

Her expression shifted away from suspicion. “No, they’re accessible already.”

Regulus nodded, as if mildly surprised. “Ah. I see.”

He turned, adjusting his course, careful to keep his pace brisk but not hurried, composed but not stiff.

Beside him, Avery let out a breath. “Nice save, Black.”

Regulus kept his eyes forward. “Not safe yet, Avery,” he muttered. “Let’s get out of here.”

*****

After that, things moved quickly.

The moment they stepped out of the phone box into Muggle London, Avery was already turning back to himself. They couldn't, under any circumstances, risk breaching the Statute like this, so they ducked into the nearest alley without a word, intent on Disapparating as soon as possible.

And that was where everything truly went wrong.

Regulus should have known. Should have seen it coming. Should have understood by now that the world had long turned against him, and that every fleeting sense of success, every moment where things seemed to go according to plan, was nothing but a wolf in sheep's clothing.

The Legot estate, Hohenhain, the Dementor attack, Ashcombe... Not once had an important mission ever ended peacefully.

So he should have known. Should have braced himself.

But he hadn't.

He rounded the corner just as he felt the Polyjuice beginning to wear off, that unmistakable pull beneath his skin, and as he prepared to Disapparate, he somehow staggered slightly, stepping aside to steady himself — just in time to miss the spell that had been aimed straight for him.

His eyes snapped up.

It was a deeply uncomfortable thing — trying to make sense of what was happening at all, trying to dodge hexes, throwing up hurried defences, all while his body was slowly reshaping itself, his clothes beginning to hang too loose, his shoes suddenly too big.

A flash of red shot past his leg, missing him by inches. Regulus jumped behind a large metal bin, his heart hammering wildly.

What the fuck was happening?

The sharp, bitter realisation cut through his panic — he didn't even have his own bloody wand. It felt awful, *wrong*, to be duelling with a wand that so clearly did not belong to him.

There were shouts across the alley as Avery dropped down beside him behind the bin. “Can’t fucking Disapparate, Black,” he hissed. “It must be blocked.”

Regulus’s heart plummeted. Fuck. *Fuck*.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” he hissed.

“How the fuck do they know?” Avery whispered.

Regulus fired a spell blindly from behind their cover. “I don’t know,” he shot back. “But we’ve changed back — maybe that’s how.”

Avery cursed under his breath. “If we try to walk away, they’ll hex us on the spot.”

“Alright,” Regulus said quietly. Crouching behind the bin wasn’t going to help them either. “Then — surprise offence?”

Avery hesitated only for a second. Their eyes met.

He nodded. “Alright. On three. One… two… three.”

They sprang out from behind the bins.

Regulus’s heart dropped straight through his chest. There were five of them — five men he didn’t even have the time to process where who, or belonged to whom, because his mind was absolutely occupied with the much more important feat, which was that they were outnumbered, exposed and concerned.

And thus, properly fucked.

Fuck!

He raised his wand, already moving to dodge—

And then everything took a sharp, unexpected turn.

One of the men froze when his eyes landed on Regulus. His expression changed instantly. He threw up a shield and shouted, “Fuck! Retreat, lads!”

“What?” another barked. “What are you talking about?”

“The orders were clear,” the man snapped. “We’ve got to go!”

And just like that, against all logic, against every expectation, they were gone. The five of them rounded the corner in a rush, the shield collapsing as the last man vanished from sight, casting one final look back.

Instantly, silence fell.

What the fuck?

Regulus stared at Avery. Avery stared back at him. Both of them were breathing hard, chests heaving, the alley suddenly eerily quiet.

“What the *fuck* was that?” Regulus breathed.

It made no sense. None at all.

Avery bent forward, hands braced on his knees, catching his breath. Then he slowly straightened, tilting his head as he looked at Regulus. Something in his expression sent a spike of cold anxiety straight down Regulus’s spine.

“You tell me, Black.”

Regulus frowned. “What?”

“Well,” Avery said quietly, “he looked at you. And then he ordered them to leave.”

Regulus glanced toward the end of the alley, where the attackers had disappeared, and then back at Avery.

Dread flooded him instantly.

“What?” he repeated, faintly.

“It was as if they were ordered not to kill you. Why would that be, Black?” Avery took a step back, now standing upright, his gaze sharpening, turning suspicious. “Why would they be ordered not to kill you?”

The blood drained from Regulus’s face.

Oh no.

This was bad. This was fucking disastrous.

“What — what do you mean, Avery?”

Avery's expression turned contemplative, almost careful. "You know… there's been talk. About a potential spy."

Regulus froze.

"The ambush at Ashcombe," Avery continued. "Several botched missions. And now a 'routine check-up' at the Ministry, exactly when we're there?"

He tilted his head again.

"And now people bolting the second they see you."

Panic surged through Regulus like fire. "No — Avery — Bertram — that has nothing to do with me. Nothing. Really—"

"And you know," Avery went on, "just today I heard Rodolphus talking about some former Hogwarts student among the werewolves."

Regulus's heart sank even further. He knew exactly where this was going.

"He told me Lupin isn't just a fucking werewolf," Avery said quietly, "but one of us now. And that you saw him."

Silence stretched between them, taut and suffocating.

"I haven't mentioned it to anyone," Avery continued. "I wanted to hear you out first. But this… we saw them at Hogwarts... And you know as well as I do how that git was with your brother. And Potter."

"I don't know, Bertram," Regulus said desperately. Oh, this could not be happening. *Why* was this happening? "About any of that. I'm at Hogwarts most days, I don't know — but —" his voice broke, "—I would never betray the Revolution." The panic flared hotter. "I've been here from the beginning!"

Another silence.

Then something shifted. It was subtle but unmistakable. Avery exhaled, rubbed a hand over his face, and nodded once.

"Alright, then," he said. "Let's just… get back. I'm sorry. I — I believe you, Black."

But Regulus knew better.

He knew very well Avery didn't believe him. Knew very well that he just wanted to get back to Northumberland, to where he could talk. And no matter how many people would instinctively side with Regulus — Cissy, Lucius, Mr Nott — an accusation like this would never be ignored.

They would make him take Veritaserum.

Regulus's thoughts flicked, unbidden, to Bellatrix.

Or worse, they'd unleash her onto his mind.

Fuck.

This was it.

The end.

Not just of him, but of everything. Of the future of the wizarding world. Because Regulus would die. And the knowledge of the Horcruxes would die with him.

His throat went dry. His heart thundered against his ribs. He swallowed hard, tears stinging his eyes.

"Well," Avery said, "let's go. Guess we can Disapparate around the corner."

There was no other way.

No other way than this.

And how he hated it. How much he hated it with every pore in his body, every fibre of his being.

Fuck. *FUCK*!

Bertram Avery. His Housemate. How many hours had they spent together in the common room? How many meals, talking Quidditch in the Great Hall? How many parties, how many games of Exploding Snap in the Black Manor drawing room? How many drinks in the Serpent?

Regulus drew a shaky breath.

The tears were coming freely now, panic clawing at his chest, his hands trembling.

With a hand shaking so violently he nearly dropped the unfamiliar wand, he raised it. His vision blurred. His voice was too broken to form the spell aloud, so he forced it silently, through sobs and despair and horror and so much guilt.

Green sparks erupted from the tip of the wand, tearing through the grey, early-April London air.

Time stretched, warped. It felt like minutes, like hours, like days, before the sparks hit Betram Avery squarely in the back.

And with it, Avery hit the ground.

Chapter 15: Of Distractions & Interrogations

Chapter Notes

> Is that me updating BOTH my WIPs? Yes! As familiar these days, way later than I'd wanted to, but yeah. I know updates are terribly slow, but I do want to remind you all that I will not abandon this story. I'm going to finish it even if it's the last thing I do!
>
> I really really appreciate all your guys' support and the lovely comments. You guys are the best. See you soon ♥
>
> Lots of love, as always, xx

The funeral was that Friday.

Pulling out Regulus already in the first week after the holidays would be too risky, so they made sure the funeral took place as soon as possible — just before the weekend before his departure. They thought they were doing him a favour, by giving him the opportunity to say goodbye to the friend he'd seen die.

Not seen die. *Killed*.

Just the thought made his stomach churn.

He wanted to scream. Throughout every minute, every second of the service dragging by torturously slowly, he wanted nothing more than to scream.

He was flanked by Isa on one side, and Barty and Evan on the other. They looked pale, distressed, being so viciously forced to face the facts. Being out there, in the field, writing history — it could very well end in being nowhere at all, but the grave, becoming history yourself.

Oh, how badly he wanted to grab them by the collar, shake them, scream in their faces that this was what they were signing up for. Next time it could very well be them.

And that thought instantly gave way to another.

What if it had been them in this situation? What if it had been Barty

and Evan who'd found him out? Would he have killed them? His best friends… After Isa, his oldest friends… Would he truly have killed them?

Just the hypothetical thought made his heart clench with panic and his throat fill with lead. So, he said nothing. He stared at the coffin, heard the eulogies somewhere vaguely in the background, and, while the feeling of self-loathing seemed to wash through every vein in his body, he remained silent.

*****

There was a small wake that evening with Avery's close circle — which was basically everyone who had attended the funeral, because they had purposefully kept the ceremony intimate.

Regulus would never truly have considered himself part of Avery's inner circle, but perhaps, in some strange way, he was. They had gone to Hogwarts more or less together. They had been part of the Revolution from the beginning. All the games of Exploding Snap and the spur-of-the-moment duels at Black Manor… And, apparently, being the one to witness him die also counted as belonging to that circle.

But he had caught a glimpse of Avery's mother, hunched with grief, clinging to her husband's arm, and at that sight Regulus had decided not to come.

He knew he was weak, a coward. The least he could do was face his own dirt, his own mistakes, but Regulus felt like there was very little courage left in him. So instead, he told Isa, Barty and Evan that he wanted to be alone for the rest of the weekend, and locked himself away in Black Manor.

He wasn't quite sure whether it was the wisest course to sit alone with his self-flagellating and self-loathing thoughts, but it was better than being smothered by them in the form of Avery's grieving family. Besides, he could really use some space to put the chaos in his mind in order.

Because he had to face the fact that there were *so* many things still unclear.

He had to find the Horcruxes. He had, in some very uncharacteristic stroke of luck, literally stumbled upon one, which was now waiting at Seacliff Hall to be destroyed. And though he had a rather concrete

idea about the others, he had yet to find them — and then destroy them all.

Besides, there was another very pressing issue — the spy. Avery's words had made it clear that rumours were circulating that there was a spy among them. Regulus was almost entirely sure that it was Rabastan, but going over it again, he realised he had little more than a hunch. He could raise his suspicions, but surely Rabastan would deny it, and perhaps turn the suspicion back onto him. And the last thing Regulus needed was to come under scrutiny, or — worse — be forced to take Veritaserum or dragged under the Occlumency claws of Bellatrix.

It was the same conflict every time — the need to stay close for information always battling with the desire to stay as far away as possible for his own safety.

Regulus exhaled deeply.

All of a sudden, he heard the flames roar to life in the entrance hall. There were only a handful of people who could enter the estate through the Floo, and most of them knew he wanted to be left alone, so Regulus left the kitchen and walked toward the hall, frowning in confusion.

He arrived just in time to see Barty in the flames. For a brief second they simply looked at each other — then the fire flared again and Isa appeared.

"Move your fat arse over, Crouch," she said, shoving him aside as she stepped out.

Barty rolled his eyes but did as told, and a few seconds later Evan followed through the flames as well.

Isa instantly clocked the stiffness in Regulus's posture. "Alright, so we know you wanted to be alone for a bit, but—"

Evan cut her off. "Barty and I are leaving for a raid in a bit. Reckon we won't be back tomorrow, so…"

The realisation dawned.

So this was their goodbye.

Suddenly, lead seemed to settle in Regulus's throat. He cleared it. "Al

—alright. I see."

Evan smiled, stepped forward, and then pulled Regulus into a tight hug. The weight in Regulus's throat only grew heavier.

"Take care, Reg," Evan murmured.

Regulus nodded against his shoulder before pulling back slightly. His voice was almost a whisper. "Look out for him, alright?"

He glanced sideways at Barty, who was hugging Isa, the two of them snorting at something under their breath.

Evan nodded. "Yeah, of course."

"And you take care of yourself too."

Evan gave him another small smile and nodded again before the hug loosened and they stepped apart.

A small silence fell. Then Isa launched herself into Evan's arms, leaving Regulus and Barty standing there, looking at each other.

Barty cleared his throat, shifting from one foot to the other, looking uncharacteristically awkward. Regulus couldn't really blame him. Here they were, so many years into their friendship, with that lowest point of it still hanging in the air. Regulus wasn't quite sure what to do, briefly debating whether he should simply offer his hand instead. But Barty had always been the unapologetic, fearless one of them, and he stepped forward and pulled Regulus into a hug.

"See you in a few months, Black."

"I'd better," Regulus muttered.

Barty huffed. "With twenty-five N.E.W.T.s, right?"

Regulus snorted softly. "Yeah. Something like that."

They pulled apart, and Regulus only then noticed that Evan and Isa were watching them.

"Alright," Isa said with a nod. "Group hug, people."

And before Regulus quite realised what was happening, he was dragged back into a chaotic tangle of arms and shoulders, the four of them squeezed together in a messy, laughing embrace.

*****

Regulus could almost have fallen to his knees in gratitude when Isa for once seemed to sense his need for space and left Black Manor with Barty and Evan, saying they would see each other on the Hogwarts Express on Sunday. It was very out of character for Isa not to probe and nag when he was visibly not alright, and as the mixture of contemplation and pity in her eyes was the very last thing he wanted to deal with, he was utterly relieved that she had taken the hint and left him alone.

Not that he would be truly alone.

It was a tad late to visit unannounced, but it was a Friday evening, so he took his chances and Apparated into London. He hadn't been here since the summer holidays, so it felt particularly on the spur of the moment just walking down that pavement, but he found that he didn't really care. Regulus crossed the street, a slight shiver running through him at the cold air, since he was wearing only a Muggle jumper, with no jacket over it. He exhaled slowly, looking first at the petrol station in front of him, and then at the more important thing — the small garage at the side.

Another deep sigh.

From inside he could hear the distant cheering of what was undoubtedly a football match being broadcast on the radio. Regulus stepped forward and knocked.

The door flew open, and Regulus found himself face to face with Fred. "Reg! Bloody hell, mate, haven't seen you in ages!"

From somewhere further inside came Marie-Anne's voice. "Did you just say *Reg*?"

"Yeah," Fred called back over his shoulder, grinning. "He's here!"

"Move over!"

Marie-Anne appeared a moment later, pushing past Fred and hurrying up to the door, a broad grin spreading across her face.

"Oh, it's been *ages*, Reg!"

Regulus cleared his throat, a little awkwardly. "I know."

Marie-Anne immediately took him by the arm and pulled him inside while Fred closed the door behind them.

“I have to admit,” she said as they stepped into the garage, “I was a bit worried when you didn’t visit over the Christmas hols.”

Regulus’s mind flicked to the Ball at the Ashcombe estate, and all the preparations that had gone into it. “Yeah, I was… abroad,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

Fred waved a hand dismissively. “No need for that, mate. Just happy you’re here.” He jerked his thumb towards the garage floor. “You wanna see what I’m working on?”

Regulus’s eyes drifted towards the car raised on the lift in the middle of the garage.

He had spent quite some time in this place over the summer holidays, and every time he saw a car being pulled apart like this, Regulus had to suppress that flicker of excitement, that small prickle of happiness. Because every time, it was followed by the knowledge that this was what Sirius felt when he saw a motorbike. The realisation that he was, in some way at least, like his brother, made him feel both angry and strangely grief-stricken, and he never quite knew what to do with that feeling. Even now the thought hit him with a sudden wave of nausea that was almost impossible to shake.

Regulus swallowed and forced himself to compose his expression.

“So,” he said, nodding towards the vehicle, “what are we dismantling here?”

Fred smirked.

“Oh, mate, this car’s been wrecking my brain for ages.” He let out a long sigh, rubbing the back of his neck. “Let’s see if we can tackle her today.”

*****

The return to Hogwarts was so strange that it almost felt… eerie. Infiltrating the Ministry and infecting its wards, killing one of his former fellow students, attending the funeral and feeling so intensely disgusted by all the pitiful looks of people assuming he had seen Avery die — and not, in fact, killed him himself — and then trying to escape all these realities with two Muggles and a garage… it was too

much to process, too much to really register that they were returning to Hogwarts, and that they would be doing so for the last time. In less than three months, they would never return again.

Another thing he hadn't quite registered, and therefore hadn't really accounted for, was the fact that people would ask questions about his best friends' absence. It was something he was forced to face almost instantly.

Isa had stayed the last night with her parents, so Regulus Apparated to King's Cross on his own after a somewhat too light-hearted goodbye from Cissy, who had, of course, Flooed over early that morning to see him off. Something about her presence had annoyed him. He knew it was unreasonable, as she was the only one who consistently checked in on him.

He thought of Mother, holed up in her bedroom save for the most necessary arrangements for the wedding she was forcing Regulus into. He thought of Father, the patriarch of their family on paper, who had abandoned its most important duties for as long as Regulus could remember. Sometimes he wondered what would happen if he were to die.

Would they care?

Of course, they would attend the funeral, but that would be duty. Nothing more. Would anything in their lives truly change? Would Mother be more shattered if she lost both her sons?

Every time he followed that train of thought, his mind betrayed him and returned to the image of his mother crying against him in her bedroom, mourning a son who was still very much alive. And deep down, Regulus knew that her grief would not deepen. He liked to think of it as a matter of degrees; perhaps when one was already grieving to the fullest extent, there was simply no room left for more. It was easier than facing the truth, after all. The truth that there might be another reason Mother would not mourn.

So yes — Regulus knew he ought to be grateful for Cissy's constant checking in on him, for the way she fussed. But something else had, especially over the last year, gradually taken hold. He couldn't really pinpoint it, couldn't really name what it was, but there was something bitter in the realisation that no matter how much she checked, no matter how much she fussed, she had still stood by willingly every time he had been sent into the field, very much still a child.

Perhaps goodness did stop where love bowed to duty at a child's expense.

He was glad to be pulled from his thoughts when the compartment door slid open, revealing Isa. She looked tired. She gave him a small smile as he helped her haul her trunk inside, then sat down across from him.

A strange tension settled. It always came at unexpected moments like this; just the two of them sitting in a room, and suddenly the realisation would strike. Isa, his best friend, who knew him better than anyone in the world. Whom he had grown up with. Whose thoughts he could often guess, with whom he had been through so much.

All the things they had shared over the years… The shared weight of their family expectations, the roles they were expected to play in their respective lines. That tension between what they wanted and what was allowed. How they had both fallen in love with someone forbidden. Both forced to break it off. Isa, who had literally witnessed his deepest emotions, and his worst trauma. Isa, his oldest and closest friend. And Isa, who was about to become his wife.

And somehow, he feared that it'd be in the very process of being forced to know each other even more, to know each other on every intimate level out there, they would become strangers.

He was fairly certain the tension was mutual, palpable in the air between them.

"Ready?" Isa eventually asked.

Regulus nodded. "Ready. You?"

"Ready."

*****

They sat in silence as the train pulled out of the station, and Regulus tried to ignore how strange it was not to be sitting next to a rowdy Barty, or to be listening in on some ridiculous exchange between Evan and Barty, or to hear Isa bicker with them — when the compartment door slid open again, and Melania and Amaryllis stepped in.

"Hi, you two — good hols?" Amaryllis asked lightly.

Isa nodded.

Regulus willed his mind not to drift — not to that vivid memory of him lying on top of James Potter in his bedroom above some Muggle chemist, nor to the shameful conversation with Isa that had followed. *What happened, happened. And now, we move forward.*

He also tried, very deliberately, not to think about the Ministry. About the mission. About the green sparks that had left his wand and resulted in the death of someone who, a year prior, might have sat beside them in this very compartment.

“Yeah,” he said, his voice a touch too thin. “Terrific.”

“And you?” Isa asked. “Good hols?”

The girls immediately began chattering as they took their seats, and Regulus was grateful to retreat into his Transfiguration book — until a question pulled him sharply back.

“So where are they?”

Regulus looked up.

“Evan and Barty — why aren’t they here?”

His eyes flicked instantly to Isa.

Oh.

He hadn’t thought about that. Of course people would ask. The crowd at the station had been uncharacteristically thin, so they surely weren’t the only ones missing — but those who stayed away were likely being kept safe, not sent out to fight the very war everyone else was trying to escape.

“Er…”

He was, once again, struck by Isa’s quick mind. Without the slightest tremor in her voice, without so much as a flicker in her expression, she offered a small, almost apologetic smile.

“Barty’s gone to Germany,” she said. “His mum was apparently quite worried about everything going on here — afraid something might happen at Hogwarts…” She sighed softly. “And so was Mrs Rosier. I believe she’s going to homeschool him.”

Amaryllis and Melania exchanged a slightly puzzled look, but then Melania nodded.

“Yeah… Mrs Rosier’s always been a bit protective, hasn’t she?”

“And Merlin, Barty too…” Amaryllis added.

Isa nodded sympathetically. “Yes. And so close to their exams…”

Regulus caught Isa’s gaze for a split second, and he knew — between all the lies — that in the sadness in her eyes was nothing but truth.

*****

Back at the castle, Regulus was instantly faced with the fact that he had been right about students being pulled from Hogwarts. Where every House table had always been crowded and filled to the brim, there were now gaps everywhere, and the noise was noticeably dimmed. The Selwyn twins had been pulled from the castle — an absence Regulus did not particularly mourn — but, together with Evan and Barty, it made their year feel suddenly much smaller. It wasn’t just their year, either. All across their House, a number of students had not returned after the holidays, and the common room felt uncomfortably reminiscent of Hogsmeade weekends, when most students from third year and up were out.

The absences were visible everywhere, a constant reminder of the war, even though many — students and staff alike — went to great lengths to pretend it was not as grim as it felt. Some of the staff had taken on an almost forced cheerfulness, so artificial it made everyone cringe, and by Monday lunchtime the House tables had even been shortened to compensate for the empty seats.

Regulus found himself listening in on a conversation between a group of Ravenclaws and Gryffindors in Transfiguration, discussing members of their respective Quidditch teams who had been pulled from school. He felt some strange sense of relative relief that at least no one from his team was missing — when the classroom door suddenly opened.

Every head turned at the abrupt sound in McGonagall’s otherwise orderly room.

Professor Hoffman stood in the doorway.

“Professor,” McGonagall said, not particularly warmly, “what can I do for you?”

Hoffman gave her what might have been intended as a friendly smile, though it was largely obscured by his thick moustache. At any rate, his eyes did not smile with it.

“I was wondering if I might borrow Mr Black for a moment?”

Regulus straightened instantly in his seat.

He had worked hard all year to stay off Hoffman’s radar — no easy feat, considering that disastrous first mentoring session and his numerous absences. Still, he had remained at the top of his class — without drawing too much attention — and had always made sure to prepare thoroughly for their monthly meetings. He had even officially enrolled in some international Potions recruitment programme, if only to get the Professor off his back regarding his future.

Yet no matter how careful he had been, no matter how well he had covered his tracks, any involvement from Hoffman felt like bad news.

McGonagall’s eyes flicked to Regulus, then back to Hoffman. “Very well. But we are covering important N.E.W.T. material, so—”

“He won’t be long, Professor,” Hoffman replied, and Regulus was now fairly certain the man was attempting something like a smile.

Regulus rose from his chair and made his way to the door, not missing the warning in Isa’s eyes as he passed.

Hoffman gestured for him to follow without a word, and it took Regulus a moment too long to realise they were heading for the Professor’s office. His throat had gone dry, his heart picking up pace, desperate to know what this was about — but he did not dare to ask.

At last, they arrived. Regulus sat down opposite the desk, pressing his palms against his thighs to make sure no sweat would show. There was always something faintly sinister about Hoffman’s silences. In some ways, Regulus counted himself fortunate to have been raised in the orbit of Bellatrix, to have sat in the presence of the Dark Lord from such a young age — because even with that, he still felt utterly on edge.

“Well, Mr Black,” Hoffman said at last, “I’m sure you know why you’re here.”

Regulus blinked.

He hadn't the faintest clue why he was there.

Which, in hindsight, was rather daft. Sure Isa had known the moment the man appeared in the doorway.

"…Er…" Regulus managed. He might have scratched his head if his hands hadn't been locked so tightly beneath his thighs.

Hoffman's expression tightened, irritation flickering across his face as he waited — then continued. "I'm looking for Mr Crouch and Mr Rosier."

Regulus blinked again. And then the panic set in. "You are?" he asked, a fraction too quickly.

Hoffman's eyes narrowed.

Regulus forced himself to steady. "I mean… they aren't, like… unregistered, are they?"

Hoffman frowned, momentarily thrown. "What do you mean?"

Regulus felt a flicker of gratitude for Melania and Amaryllis in the compartment the day before, because he was fairly certain he wouldn't have managed this on the fly without that precedent.

"Well… I assume their parents have withdrawn them, right?"

Hoffman's eyes narrowed again. "Why would you assume that, Mr Black?"

"I received letters from both of them over the holidays," Regulus said, trying very hard to keep his voice even. "They said they were being pulled from Hogwarts. I mean — surely their parents have communicated that to the staff here?"

Hoffman studied him in silence, clearly trying to gauge whether he was being lied to. Regulus did his utmost to appear genuinely confused — not too much, just enough.

"We have received communication from the Rosiers, yes—" Regulus had a fairly good idea where this was going, "—but we have heard nothing from the Crouches."

A silence stretched.

"And not only that," Hoffman continued, "Mr Crouch Sr. has

contacted *us* regarding Barty Crouch Jr.'s absence."

Regulus resisted the urge to scoff at that lie. He knew perfectly well that Hoffman had been installed at Hogwarts to report back to the Ministry. It had absolutely been him who had passed on the information of Barty's absence to Mr Crouch Sr. And he was surely trying to curry favour with the country's Vice Minister by locating his missing son.

He tried to look confused again. "What… what do you mean, Professor?"

Hoffman's irritation showed more plainly now. "It means that Barty Crouch Jr. has not returned to Hogwarts, and that his parents have no idea where he is."

Regulus realised that arguing the point — that Barty, being of age, hardly required the grace of his father for any decision in his life — would only raise suspicion. Better to just look confused.

"Well… I… I don't know how all that works, Professor," he said. "I only know that I received a letter over the holidays in which Barty said he was being pulled from school."

Hoffman's expression made it abundantly clear how little he believed him.

"I can show you the letter, if you'd like," Regulus added quickly. "It's still at home, but I could have it sent by owl—"

Hoffman shook his head. "No, that won't be necessary, Mr Black. You're excused."

Regulus nodded, swallowing as he rose from his seat. He had just opened the door and was about to step through when Hoffman's voice stopped him.

"We will find out, Mr Black," he said.

Regulus turned back, meeting the sharp, scrutinising gaze of his Professor.

"We will find out exactly where Barty Crouch Jr. is," Hoffman continued, "and we will find out exactly what your role is in… all of this."

Regulus opened his mouth, then closed it again. Before he could think of anything to counter the accusation beneath those words, Hoffman spoke once more.

“Close the door behind you, Mr Black. And return to your lesson immediately.”

*****

As they were surrounded by the curious ears of Amaryllis and Melania during classes and during dinner, it was already far into the evening when Regulus and Isa were finally alone. With Barty, Evan and Selwyn gone, Crabbe was now Regulus’s only roommate, and he spent most of his time with the fifth and sixth years, meaning that most of the time Regulus would have the dorm to himself. Isa, sharp as she was, must have envisaged this, as she all but burst into the room, already in her leisure clothes, to ask what happened with Hoffman.

“I was afraid something like this would happen,” Isa said once Regulus had relayed his conversation with Hoffman. “I overheard my parents talking about how they might make attendance at Hogwarts compulsory.”

Regulus’s eyebrows shot up. “What?”

Isa nodded. “Yes. Though it’s too late for that now — it would take years for such a law to pass through the Wizengamot.”

“Oh, they’ll find a way around that if they want to, believe me,” Regulus said darkly. After all, the Ministry had been steadily consolidating power over the years, and under some kind of marital law, such a degree could very well be pushed through easily.

“It will be too late, I think,” Isa said, her expression thoughtful. “Many of the families the Ministry would want to keep an eye on are already graduated or have already withdrawn from Hogwarts — I mean, you’re the last Black here, the Selwyns are gone, the Carrows will likely be pulled too…”

Regulus sighed and flopped back onto his bed, staring up at the ceiling.

“And now Evan and Barty,” Isa continued, her tone darkening. “I mean, they’re of age and can make their own decisions… but it must be driving Barty’s father mad.”

Regulus huffed, nodding faintly. Mad was probably an understatement.

“And I don’t think we’ve heard the last of it,” Isa finished, her voice even darker now.

*****

It took less than two days for Isa’s words to prove true. And where Hoffman’s scrutinising gaze had already made Regulus uncomfortable, the sensation was taken to an entirely new level that day.

It began when he was pulled from his Potions lesson — which, in hindsight, Regulus recognised as a clever move. Being taken from any other class, or from the Great Hall, would have definitely drawn far too much attention from the wrong people.

“Alright, so — two clockwise…”

Regulus stood over his cauldron, stirring twice clockwise before pausing.

“—three counter-clockwise,” Isa murmured beside him, following suit.

A knock sounded at the door.

Regulus was too focused on the valerian roots he was about to add to properly register it — or the fact that someone had already entered.

“…Mr Black?”

He looked up at Slughorn, slightly bewildered, then followed his Head of House’s gaze towards the door — and his heart dropped at once at the sight of Professor Hoffman.

“Well then, my boy,” Slughorn said cheerfully, “if Professor Hoffman requires your presence, off you go!”

Regulus exchanged a dark look with Isa before stepping away and following the Professor. Somehow, despite his pounding heart and a throat so dry it bordered on painful, he managed to keep his voice steady.

“What is this about, Professor?”

Hoffman glanced at him, his expression flat, unreadable. “You will see.”

Regulus cast a sideways glance at his Professor as they moved briskly from the dungeons towards the main staircase. There was something almost… nervous about Hoffman. A chill crept through Regulus's veins.

The walk to Hoffman's office felt both interminable and over in an instant. When they entered the plain, orderly room, it was empty, and Regulus found himself seated in the same chair as two days prior.

Hoffman, however, did not sit. Instead he hovered, restless, adjusting parchment that was already perfectly aligned, nudging a chair, straightening it again, only to move it once more as if unsatisfied. Regulus's unease deepened, suspicion creeping in, and more and more the sense tightened around him that he was slowly being cornered.

Just as the realisation hit that it was utterly strange that Hoffman had not taken his seat behind the desk, the door opened, and with it, that particularity was explained.

Regulus wanted punch himself. Of course. He should've known this would happen.

The man entered with a purposeful stride, closing the door behind him with a flick of his wand. He did not spare Hoffman so much as a glance as the Professor hurried aside to make room, retreating towards the wall.

The man took the seat slowly, cleared his throat, and when his eyes lifted to meet Regulus's, something cold seemed to pierce straight through him.

"Regulus Black."

Regulus swallowed.

"Mr Crouch."

He had seen the man in person before — years ago, when his family's circles had not yet grown so distant from the Ministry. Mr Crouch had been at one of the Balls at Dreadmoor Keep, Reglus was sure, but since the war, it had taken a particular kind of diplomat to maintain a footing in both worlds — men like Lucius, his father Abraxas Malfoy, or Mr Nott. And though undoubtedly a capable politician, Mr Crouch had always made it perfectly clear that his loyalties lay with the Ministry and with the Ministry only.

Now, sitting only a few feet away, it struck Regulus just how much Barty took after his father. The same blue eyes, the same sharp jawline — though Barty's was often shadowed with a hint of stubble, while his father's remained clean, save for the neat moustache beneath his nose. Yes, seeing him like this, in the flesh and in colour, gave Regulus a far clearer understanding of the resemblance Barty so clearly detested.

"Well, Regulus," Mr Crouch began, not a trace of warmth in his expression, "I could indulge in a brief account of all the things my son has told me about his friends over the years, but I frankly do not have the time for such nonsense."

And with that stern, piercing look, the differences between father and son became just as apparent. There was only efficiency and purpose — no hint of playfulness, no spark of mischief or defiance in the man's eyes. Whatever Barty had of those things, he had not inherited them from him.

"So," Mr Crouch continued, "let us simply say that I am aware you, that Rosier boy and Bartemius are… closely associated. Which is why I assume you know where he is."

Regulus blinked, momentarily thrown by the use of Barty's full name. It sounded so impersonal — which, in a way, made perfect sense.

He realised, belatedly, that he had to respond.

"Er… well, I must admit I'm rather surprised, Mr Crouch."

Mr Crouch's expression did not so much as flicker. "And why is that?"

"Well," Regulus said carefully, "Barty sent me a letter… saying that it was you and Mrs Crouch who had withdrawn him from Hogwarts."

Mr Crouch blinked once. Then again. His eyes narrowed slightly as he leaned forward, resting his elbows on the mahogany desk and folding his hands together in an almost unsettling way.

"Is that so, Regulus?"

Regulus nodded. "Yes — something about Mrs Crouch particularly wanting him home…"

Mr Crouch's gaze sharpened further. "We both know that is utter nonsense, Regulus. Bartemius was not withdrawn from Hogwarts by anyone. He made the decision himself not to return."

Regulus knew this to be true — though he could not help but wonder how Mr Crouch had come by the information himself.

The man seemed to sense the thought. “He visited his mother in Germany over the Easter holidays,” Mr Crouch continued. “And I have been given to understand that it felt… like a farewell.”

Regulus tilted his head slightly. For once, the confusion in his expression was genuine. He had not known Barty had gone to see his mother.

“And now,” Mr Crouch said, his tone sharpening, “perhaps you would care to explain why Bartemius has chosen, mere months before his graduation, to abandon Hogwarts?”

Regulus opened his mouth, then closed it again. “Well — no, Mr Crouch, because… I was under the impression that—”

“Rubbish.”

Mr Crouch did not raise his voice, nor did he move, and yet the word landed like a blow and made Regulus recoil all the same.

Silence stretched between them. Mr Crouch studied him almost clinically before his gaze flicked briefly to Hoffman.

“Well,” he said at last, “in that case, I see no other choice.”

Regulus’s head snapped towards his Professor, alarm flaring. No other choice? What did that mean? Before he could voice the question, Mr Crouch gave a small nod, and Hoffman immediately turned and left the room.

Regulus knew at once what that meant. Whatever was about to happen, it was not meant to have witnesses. And he had a very good idea of what that might be — Mr Crouch stopped at nothing. Without a doubt, the man had hoped that his presence alone — the Vice Minister himself — would be enough to intimidate Regulus into speaking. And now that it had not, he would turn to more effective methods. He was pretty sure that he was about to witness the liberated use of the Unforgivables in a very personal way. Surely the man commanded a powerful Imperius, and an even more formidable Cruciatus. Perhaps, with enough control, he could somehow resist the former, but the latter… To keep his mouth shut under torture…

Regulus braced himself. He flinched, steeling himself for what was to

come.

But then something strange happened.

The door creaked open, and suddenly Hoffman was back — this time carrying a tray with tea and biscuits. Regulus was utterly lost. Surely Mr Crouch wasn't about to host a bloody tea party just to get the truth —

And then it clicked.

His eyes flicked from the tray, now set neatly on the desk, to Mr Crouch's cold, unyielding gaze.

Of course.

Of course he wouldn't resort to an Unforgivable. Mr Crouch was as sly a Slytherin as they came. An Unforgivable could be detected — even if they masked the sounds of screams under the Cruciatus, the magic itself could be traced back to his wand. And an Imperius could be resisted. But there was nothing he could resist, and nothing to be traced back regarding the Veritaserum undoubtedly put in the cup of tea set in front of him.

"Tea, Regulus?" Mr Crouch asked.

Regulus forced his expression to remain composed. "No, thank you, sir. I'm not thirsty."

Mr Crouch remained eerily calm. "Still, it is a matter of politeness to take a cup of tea with me." A pause. "I am sure the Blacks still value manners and respect."

Regulus bit down hard on his tongue — but his mind betrayed him, flashing unbidden to the memory of Evan, pale with panic in the fireplace at Black Manor, and worse — to Barty, bleeding out in his arms, the grotesque wound at his shoulder, the dark bruising blooming across his ribs.

And before he could stop himself, the words slipped out. "Only when the recipient is deserving of it, Mr Crouch."

And for the first time, something shifted. For the first time, there was emotion in the man's eyes. His eyes flashed with anger and his voice rose just a fraction. "I will ensure," he said, "by whatever means necessary, that you find the respect to accept a cup of tea with me,

Regulus Black."

Mr Crouch raised his wand. Regulus shot to his feet, undoubtedly reaching for his own even though he knew he didn't stand a chance — when the office door slammed open.

All three of them froze, turning towards the doorway.

The Headmaster stood there.

"Bartemius," Dumbledore said, some kind of warmth colouring his voice — though none of it reached his eyes. "I was not aware you were visiting Hogwarts today. I am usually informed of such visits in advance."

Mr Crouch straightened at once, lowering his wand as he turned. "This is not an official Ministry visit."

Regulus's gaze darted between them — Dumbledore, Hoffman, Crouch — his pulse still hammering.

"Ah," Dumbledore said mildly. "In that case, for non-Ministry business — particularly when it concerns one of my students — I would generally expect either myself, or at the very least the student's Head of House, to be present." A short silence stretched. "I do happen to have a few minutes. Shall we continue?"

He stepped into the room, as if about to conjure himself a chair, but Mr Crouch shook his head.

"No, thank you, Albus. We are quite finished."

Dumbledore's eyes flicked, briefly but pointedly, to the untouched tea on the desk — then to Regulus, and back to Mr Crouch.

"In that case," he said lightly, "there are a few matters I should like to discuss with you. Perhaps over a cup of tea in my office? I promise not to take more than half an hour of your very valuable time."

Mr Crouch's eyes burned, but he inclined his head nonetheless.

Dumbledore smiled, then turned to Regulus. "I believe you have a lesson to return to, Mr Black?"

It took Regulus a second too long to realise he was being addressed.

"Yes — yes, Headmaster," he said quickly, already moving.

He made for the door, but as he stepped out, he glanced back once more at Mr Crouch, and mercilessly, the realisation struck that if the man had shown just a slight trace of his current interest or concern for Barty throughout the years, he might not have been here at all, wondering whether his son was truly about to fight at the opposite end of the war.

*****

“God, Cap, how do you *cope* with all these subjects?”

Miller flopped down onto the grass next to Regulus, tossing her Transfiguration book aside in theatrical despair. It landed a few yards away from their sunny spot, and after a deep, desperate sigh, she Accio’d it back, resigning herself to her fate.

“To be fair,” Regulus said, amused, “I do think Transfiguration is one of the hardest subjects out there.”

Miller groaned again. “Yeah, and it just so happens to be one of the subjects needed for almost any ‘promising career path’.”

Regulus sniggered. “Is that what Slughorn said?”

Miller nodded.

“How was the career talk with him, then?”

“Oh, it was fine,” Miller shrugged. “Got bombarded with about a thousand options I’m apparently meant to remember, and then there was Hoffman—”

Regulus sat up straighter at once. “Hoffman was there?”

“Yeah, but he didn’t really do anything… just sat there at the back.”

Miller rolled her eyes, opening her book again and flipping through it. Regulus tried to shake the familiar sense of dread that crept in whenever he was reminded of the professor’s presence, focusing instead on going over his Potions text once more.

Exams were only a few weeks away, and like anyone taking N.E.W.T.s or O.W.L.s, Miller was very clearly feeling the pressure. Her nerves showed mostly in the form of complaints and frequent attempts to distract herself by doing literally anything but studying — which, frankly, was far preferable to Isa’s constant fussing and relentless

reminders that truly gave Regulus the ick. More often than not, Regulus left Isa to Amaryllis and Melania in the library and came here instead — their usual spot by the lake, preferably in the sun. Miller always brought snacks, made for lively company, and it gave him the opportunity to help her revise.

Somewhere, deep down, Regulus even felt a faint sense of relief at the absence of Evan and Barty — at least this way, he could spend time with her without consequence. Spending hours with the only Muggleborn in Slytherin would, in the best case, have earned him endless teasing from Barty, and in the worst, very uncomfortable questions or attention from the wrong people. The thought, admittedly, made him feel faintly sick — acknowledging any advantage in Barty's absence, in him not being safe at the castle, but instead risking his life on the front lines, felt deeply wrong, especially knowing Evan was out there with him. And now, again, he forced himself to shove the feeling down.

"So," Regulus said after a while, "any idea about your bright future, Miller?"

She snorted. "Well, it's not in Transfiguration, that's for sure."

A brief silence followed, and Regulus became aware of something lingering in the air — something unspoken that set him slightly on edge. Miller was usually unapologetically direct, so this kind of hesitation was rare.

"What is it?" he asked, setting his book aside.

Miller gave him a small, slightly sheepish smile before sighing and glancing sideways at him. "Well… I was thinking… I'm not exactly brilliant at any of these subjects—"

"You've passed all your exams so far," Regulus cut in. "I think you're doing just fine—"

"Yes, but I have to work hard for it," she said. "And there's something I don't really have to work hard for — or, well, I do, but I don't mind it."

Realisation dawned.

"Quidditch."

Miller nodded. "Yeah. But that's mad, isn't it? A career in Quidditch?"

Regulus's mind flicked back to her first try-out — and every match since, where she'd outflown nearly everyone on the pitch.

"No, Miller," he said firmly. "A career in Quidditch for you? That's not mad at all."

She smiled.

Regulus tried not to think about a different version of things — one without war, without Orders or Revolutionaries — where James might have gone professional, and where Miller might have flown alongside him.

Luckily, Miller pulled him out of it by abruptly tossing her Transfiguration book aside again.

"You know, Cap," she said, "I think I'm done for today. My brain can't take in anything else."

Her eyes drifted towards the Quidditch pitch in the distance. "God, I could really do with a fly."

Regulus sighed. "Pitch is booked until after dinner, unfortunately."

A pause. Then he caught the mischievous curve of her lips.

"Well," she said, "what about a bit of Muggle sport instead?"

Regulus raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

Miller reached into her bag and pulled out a football.

Regulus groaned. "You're trying to kill my pride, aren't you?"

She laughed, her ponytail bouncing as she threw her head back. "You're getting better, Cap!"

Regulus shot her an unimpressed look.

Miller laughed even harder, getting to her feet and kicking the ball towards him. Regulus stood as well.

"No, I mean it," she teased. "You could go pro!"

Regulus snorted, but kicked the ball back anyway.

And so the afternoon slipped into evening with Miller teasing him

mercilessly about his complete lack of skill with a football, Regulus doing his best to improve, both of them laughing at their own expense. She showed off her footwork; he attempted to copy it, with disastrous results that had them both doubled over with laughter.

And as they finally made their way back to the castle for dinner, Regulus felt a warmth settle in his chest for having found such a friend in her — in bright, unbothered Miller who, against all odds, seemed to be the only person these days capable of pulling him out of the weight of the war, the impending wedding, and the ever-present absence of the one Chaser that, in another dimension, might've flown alongside her.

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